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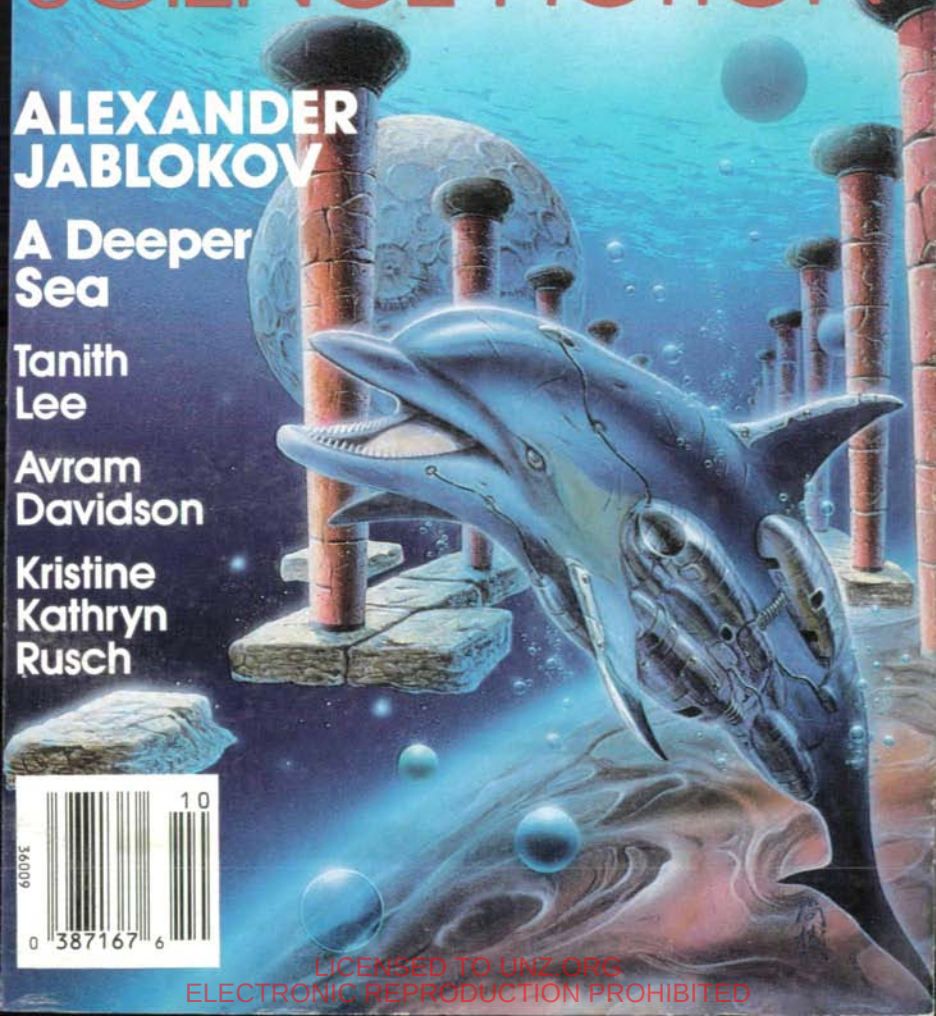

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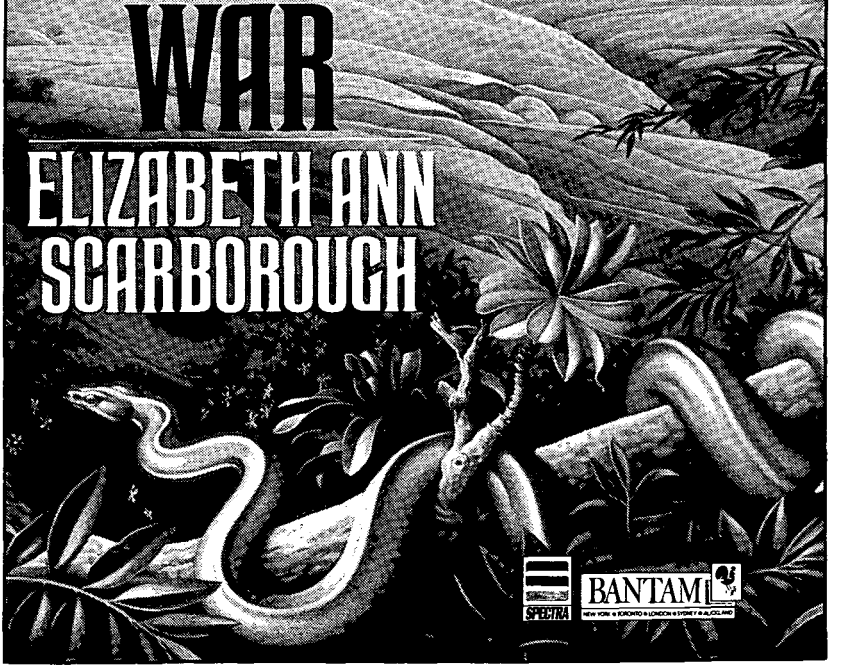

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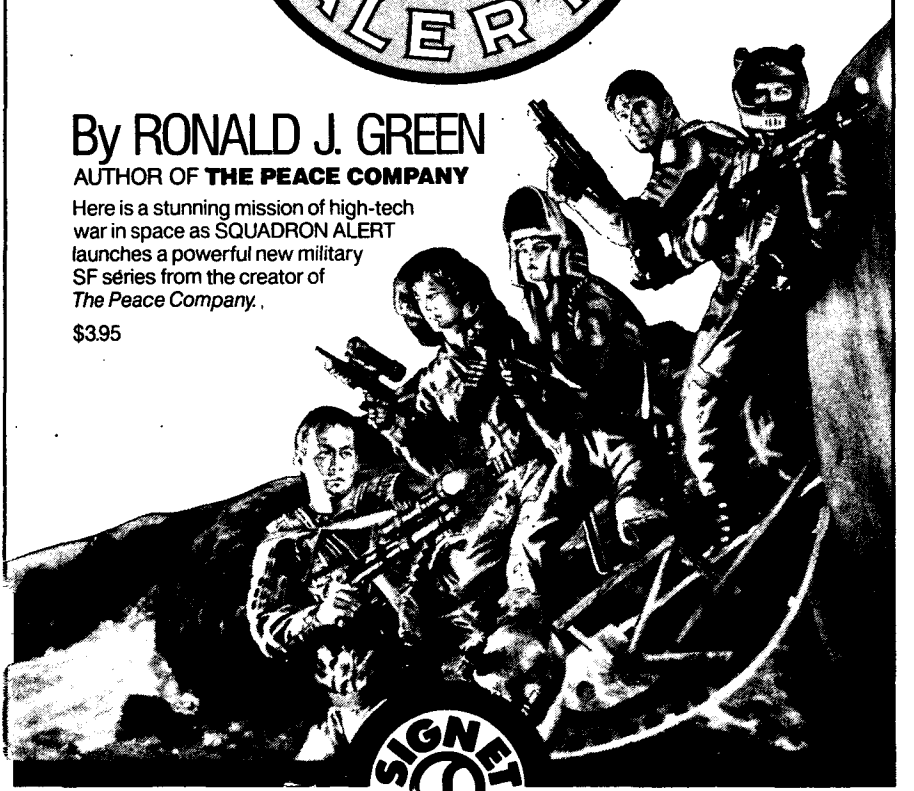

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Vol. 13 No. 10 (Whole number 148)
October 1989
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Novella

130 A Deeper Sea ____ Alexander Jablokov

Novelettes

20 Fast Cars ____ Kristine Kathryn Rusch
66 The Return of the Kangaroo Rex ____ Janet Kagan

Short Stories

52 Zelle's Thursday ____ Tanith Lee
64 Waiting for Willie ____ Avram Davidson
102 Kites ____ M.F. McHugh
114 Points of View ____ Kathe Koja

Departments

4 Editorial: Assassination ____ Isaac Asimov
8 3rd Annual Readers' Award ____
10 Letters ____
18 Neat Stuff ____ Matthew J. Costello
177 On Books ____ Baird Searles
192 The SF Conventional Calendar ____ Erwin S. Strauss

Poems by M. Shayne Bell, Bruce Boston, and Robert Frazier

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

ASSASSINATION

Assassination is defined as a murder done by stealth, or from ambush, as opposed to a death in open fight, in battle, in a duel, or in a barroom brawl. Somehow, though, assassination has come to be associated with political murders, with the killing of public figures.

In fact, when a public figure is killed, a political motive is usually found for it.

For instance, Harmodius and Aristogeiton were two young Athenian lovers in 514 B.C. At the time, Athens was ruled by two brothers, Hippias and Hipparchus, and the Athenians were restive under them. Apparently, Hipparchus was the hypoteneuse of a love triangle and Harmodius and Aristogeiton decided to solve the problem by killing the brothers. They managed to kill Hipparchus, but Hippias survived, grew very nervous and became tyrannical. He saw to it that Harmodius and Aristogeiton were unpleasantly executed, for instance.

Hippias was expelled in 510 B.C., and the Athenians established a democracy. Harmodius and Aristogeiton were then made into political heroes, and the murder for personal reasons became an idealistic political killing. The grateful Athenians proceeded to put up statues to them as freedom-fighters.

In 336 B.C., Philip of Macedon was getting married to a new wife. His old wife was going to be shucked off and his son (the later Alexander the Great) was to be disinherited. At the marriage feast, Philip was killed. Everyone thinks the first wife and son planned it. Purely personal, but, of course, it had a political effect.

Then there *are* political killings. When a political figure wins big, an angry loser may decide on revenge—so Marcus Brutus kills Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., and John Wilkes Booth kills Abraham Lincoln in 1865.

But how did all this come to be called "assassination"?

Well, toward the end of the eleventh century, the Seljuk Turks were doing very well. They beat the Byzantine Empire and took over most of Asia Minor. They also beat the Fatimids of Egypt and took over Syria and Palestine. The Turks and the Fatimids were both Mos-

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lems but of different varieties. The Turks were strong Sunnites, and the Fatimids were strong Shiites. The split between them came in 661, only twenty-nine years after Muhammad's death. In that year, Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, was killed. The Shiites supported Ali, the Sunnites opposed him, and the split between them has continued ever since right down to the present day, thirteen and a half centuries later.

With the Sunnite Turks winning big, the Shiites had to do something. The Ismailis were a group of Shiite extremists and one of them, Hasan ibn al-Sabbah, seized a valley in the rough country south of the Caspian Sea (in what is now Iran, as it happens). Ringed by mountains, it was virtually impregnable, and al-Sabbah (as well as each of his successors) became known as "the Old Man of the Mountain."

His followers were trained in absolute loyalty to the Old Man. It is said that he encouraged them to chew hashish, and then explained the drug-imposed hallucinations as visions of heaven—a heaven they would enter immediately, if they fell in the line of duty.

Because of this, the followers of the Old Man of the Mountain were called "Hashishim" ("hashish-smokers"). To Europeans, this became "assassins."

The method of operation of the new sect was simple, if terrifying. They did not act against the common people, or attempt to organize

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armies. They organized secret agents, instead, whose mission it was to kill rulers, generals, and leaders. They struck at the heart and were virtually unstoppable, since they knew they were going to heaven the moment they were killed while engaged in this task, and therefore made no effort to get away. A killer who is not in the least interested in getting away is almost sure to succeed sooner or later. It is only the difficulty of getting away that complicates most such plans. It is because of the activities of this sect that any political killing is now called an "assassination."

The prime targets of the Assassins were, of course, the Sunnite leaders, although the killers also aimed at those Shiites who were the wrong sort. (It is hard to satisfy an extremist.) Their first great coup was the assassination of Nizam al-Mulik, the vizier Seljuk, in 1092.

He was the most capable of all the Seljuk officials and without him, the kingdom split into fragments that began fighting each other. It couldn't have happened at a worse time, for in 1096 the Crusaders were on their way. They'd have been smashed if Nizam al-Mulik still guided a united Seljuk realm.

While Crusaders and Turks fought it out bloodily, the Assassins dashed nimbly in and out, aiming at both with grim impartiality. The Turks tried to crush the Old Man of the Mountain by military force, but they were easily held off once they entangled themselves in the wild mountain ranges. And while the Assassins defended their fastness, they established subsidiary strongholds in Mesopotamia and Syria. For a century and a half they kept up a unique reign of terror, and no ruler in the Middle East could sleep in security.

What happened to the Assassins? Well, they met their match. In 1206, Genghis Khan unified the Mongol tribes of central Asia and proved to be, perhaps, the greatest military genius of all time. Out of almost nothing, he created unstoppable armies, with a spy service, with communications, with mobility that wasn't matched until the mechanized armies of the twentieth century.

In 1255, a Mongol army under Hulagu Khan, a grandson of Genghis, moved into what is now Iran en route to the great city of Baghdad. They passed the Caspian Sea and they knew all about the Old Man of the Mountain and had no intention of fooling around. Hulagu sent his army swarming into the valley and up the mountains and simply wiped them out, stronghold after stronghold. The Mongols weren't very pleasant, but you had to admit they got the job done.

So you see the role played by religion. You can offer hit-men money but that leaves them careful. They want to live and enjoy the money. Offer them *heaven* and they don't care if they live.

It's not just the Moslems. During

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the religious wars in Europe, the Netherlands was fighting a long war for independence from Spain. The Netherlanders were Protestant; Spain was Catholic. The Spanish king, Philip II, an extreme Catholic, offered a reward for the assassination of the Netherlandish leader, William the Silent. On July 10, 1584, William was shot by Balthasar Gerard, a Catholic extremist.

Henry III was king of France at the time. He was a Catholic, but the exigencies of politics forced him to move into alliance with Henry of Navarre, a Protestant. That was enough. On August 1, 1589, he was killed by a Catholic extremist, Jacques Clement.

Henry of Navarre eventually became king of France as Henry IV. He turned Catholic in order to qualify, but that wasn't enough. On May 14, 1610, he was killed by a Catholic extremist, François Ravaillac.

I don't suppose that we'll ever be able to do anything about the assassination of political leaders. Four American Presidents have been assassinated and there have been failed attempts at several others.

In 1989, however, something new was added. A religious call went out to kill the *author of a book* that some people found offensive. It was complete with the offer of money and promise of heaven.

Now *many* books are offensive. One can refuse to read them. One can denounce them. One can demonstrate against them. I can easily (all too easily) imagine books that I would find so offensive I would join a march against them.

But it is wrong to attempt to *force* people not to read it, or use *force* against the writer. Think what a horrible precedent that would set. Any book, any book at all, is offensive to somebody or other. If the present threat succeeds, it will encourage future threats of the sort. Think of what a chilling effect that would have on free speech. Even the United States wouldn't remain a haven. What is the defense against fanatics? It takes only one.

Will it become necessary for writers to weigh every word? Is this going to offend the baby-carriage manufacturers? Is that going to offend the pole-vaulters?

A certain well-known Cardinal denounced the book in question and said he would recommend that Catholics not read it because it offended another religion. And of course he was against the threatened murder. However, was he doing the right thing?

Since then, there has been a threat to blow up Dante's tomb because in "The Divine Comedy," he placed in Hell some individuals that are revered by other religions. Would the Cardinal suggest that his flock not read Dante? Is he going to disown the Crusaders? Is he going to disown Philip II of Spain? And how about Torquemada? *I* find *him* offensive.

In other words, where does this sort of thing stop? ●

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3rd ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

Photo: Jane Jewell

Fiction winners are, from left to right, Orson Scott Card, Connie Willis, and Michael Swanwick.

Well, hard as it is to believe—where *does* the time go?—yet another year has come and gone, and *that* means that it's time to tell you the winners of *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine's* Third Annual Readers' Award poll. Remember that, as always, these were *your* choices, the stories that *you*—the readers—liked best out of all the fiction we published during 1988. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, once again, it's intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' polls conducted by *Locus* or *Science Fiction Chronicle*. As always, voting was heavy, and this year's winners, and runners-up, were:

Novella

1. THE LAST OF THE WINNEBAGOS, CONNIE WILLIS
2. The Scalehunter's Beautiful Daughter, Lucius Shepard
3. Surfacing, Walter Jon Williams
4. The Limit of Vision, John Barnes
5. At Winter's End, Robert Silverberg
6. Trapping Run, Harry Turtledove
7. Waiting for the Olympians, Frederik Pohl
8. The Madonna of the Wolves, Somtow Sucharitkul
9. Gilgamesh in Uruk, Robert Silverberg
10. We Are for the Dark, Robert Silverberg

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Novelette:

1. DOWSER, ORSON SCOTT CARD
2. The Hob, Judith Moffett
3. Under the Covenant Stars, John Barnes
4. The Function of Dream Sleep, Harlan Ellison
5. Nicoji, M. Shayne Bell
6. Glacier, Kim Stanley Robinson
7. Ginny Sweethips' Flying Circus, Neal Barrett, Jr.
8. The Earth Doth Like a Snake Renew, James Tiptree, Jr.
9. Do Ya, Do Ya, Wanna Dance, Howard Waldrop
10. The Lunatics, Kim Stanley Robinson

Short Story:

1. A MIDWINTER'S TALE, MICHAEL SWANWICK
2. Ripples in the Dirac Sea, Geoffrey A. Landis
3. Christmas Without Rodney, Isaac Asimov
4. Joan's World, Ian Watson
5. Ado, Connie Willis
6. Live from the Mars Hotel, Allen M. Steele
7. Dying in Hull, D. Alexander Smith
8. Stairs, Neal Barrett, Jr.
9. Home Front, James Patrick Kelly
10. Vacuum States, Geoffrey A. Landis

Best Cover Artist:

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3. Bob Eggleton
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6. Robert Walters
7. Stanislaw Fernandes
8. Hank Jankus
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10. J.K. Potter

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4. Nicholas Jainschigg
5. Gary Freeman
6. J.K. Potter
7. Robert Walters
8. Hank Jankus
9. Terry Lee
10. Richard Christ

Both our Readers' Awards and *Analog's* Analytical Laboratory Awards were presented on April 21, 1989, during a dinner party at The Grand Palace Restaurant in New York City's Chinatown. After a sumptuous ten-course banquet, the winners rose—groaningly, in some cases—to accept their certificates, beautifully hand-lettered by Philadelphia artist Tess Kissinger, and a cash award. Of the *IAsfm* winners, Connie Willis, Michael Swanwick, and Orson Scott Card were all on hand to accept their awards. After dinner, the bloated banqueters made their way out into the street, moving very slowly, and attempted to cope with the task of finding cabs to take them to that night's SFWA party at the Penta Hotel—as far as we know, all of them made it there alive. The next night there was another banquet, the Nebula Award Banquet, and Connie Willis won another award, a Nebula, also for "The Last of the Winnebagos." And after that, *another* party. And you thought the writing life was dull! The last diehard, still feebly partying, was pushed forcibly out of the SFWA suite at about 4 A.M.

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov:

As a longtime subscriber, science fiction fan, and geologist, I was especially pleased to read Lisa Mason's "Deus Ex Machina" in your December 1988 issue. Her description of the aftermath of the next great San Francisco earthquake was so provocative that I'll forgive her minor geological inaccuracies such as placing the Pilarcitos fault beneath Big Sur instead of Pacifica.

I've been teaching about earthquake preparedness and doing research on the earthquake faults of the San Francisco Bay region for many years. All efforts, fiction or nonfiction, that can help motivate people to get prepared for the "big one" are appreciated. Besides, it was a very good story, too.

Dr. Jon S. Galehouse
Professor of Geology
San Francisco State University
San Francisco, CA

I hope your efforts at teaching earthquake preparedness are made easier by the sad example of the recent Armenian quake (which cost me a chance to meet Mr. Gorbachev, by the way, to mention something ultramicroscopic in comparison to the main disaster).

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I reply to Mr. Colton's letter in the January 1989 issue of *IAsfm*. I have been a member of Mensa for some seven years and I am fully of the belief that intelligence tests do not measure what they purport to measure, especially for judging people or the validity of their opinions.

What is rather disturbing is that Mr. Colton perceived some sort of personal insult from the April letter writer to which he refers. I am proud of my Mensa membership. An I.Q. test may not measure anything more than an ability to do well on I.Q. tests, but that does not negate the fact that the organization does bring people together who, while of diverse interests, backgrounds, and beliefs, often share many ideas or who can at least argue about those ideas intelligently. I think that is a worthy purpose. That belonging to Mensa somehow implies that one thinks of oneself as "superior" or of one's opinions as "better" than another's is, to me, a rather gross generalization. It has been my experience that most people value their own opinions over the opinions of others, whether they belong to Mensa or not. Rather, it appears to me that intelligent people are the least likely to consider their own opin-

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ions as the final word. Mr. Colton should understand that Mensa, like many other groups, has to accept all those people who meet its requirements, and that among these people there may be those who choose to wear their membership as a badge of superiority. The attitude Mr. Colton finds so disturbing is equally evidenced in people of other groups. I take anyone who considers themselves a "genius" with a smile and a grain of salt.

I am, however, quite insulted at Mr. Colton's allegation that people who do well on I.Q. tests consider them a "primary indicator of a person's worth." Perhaps I am lucky with the group I am with, but I have seen no such indications. I personally do not introduce myself by "Hi! I'm 174. What are you?" and I have yet to hear anyone else do so.

I, and the people I have met are not perfect . . . truly as human as you, Dr. Asimov . . . but we do seem to use some other criteria for judging a person's worth; perhaps criteria similar to that which Mr. Colton uses. It is regrettable that one person chose to be as tasteless as the April letter writer did, but Mr. Colton's generalizations certainly did not address that point, as perhaps he meant to.

May it comfort Mr. Colton to know that a great many people who do well on I.Q. tests are also warm, caring, wise individuals not given to judging a person on intelligence quotient (or ANY one factor) alone, as are any number of people who do not do well on I.Q. tests.

Sincerely,

Sherri J. Murphy
Orlando, FL

Everything you say is reasonable, Ms. Murphy, but I think you are being too hard on Mr. Colton. He only decried undue *reliance on I.Q. tests. I'm afraid I have met many people who think a little more of themselves than would be justified, Mensa and non-Mensa alike. I think, however, that Mensans are a* little *more tempted to make this mistake than others are. And remember, I say this as a Mensan myself.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear sir,

In your reply to my letter, which you printed in the Sept. 1988 edition, you stated that the speed of light could not be compared to a steamboat. In my letter, I did not claim that it should.

You missed my point, my point being, that until "Fulton's Folly" was in the water and operated under its own power, Fulton's idea or theory was just that, an unproven theory. When the boat not only floated but operated under its own power, then Fulton's idea became a proven fact!

In the same manner, Einstein's *Theorem* that the speed of light cannot be exceeded remains just that—**THEORY.** (Someone's idea.) It has not been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. Only when we approach the speed of light and find that we cannot exceed it, will it then become a proven scientific law!

While I am willing to accept the preponderance of evidence in its favor, I refuse to close my mind to the possibility that some future scientist might prove it to be in error.

You suggested that a knowledge

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of Physical Theory is necessary. It is also necessary to understand that just because some prominent scientist expounds a theory it is not automatically a scientific law. According to Einstein's formula the second A-bomb which was dropped on Japan should have had a force equivalent to twelve-hundred tons of TNT. Instead it had a force of twenty-thousand tons! The formula still worked, but the results were much different!

Since I have not been doing research for a number of years, I don't flaunt my credentials, but I will tell you that when I applied for employment at the Lewis Flight Propulsion Lab of NASA and took their exam, thanks to twenty bonus points as a wounded Veteran, I scored one hundred and twenty percent out of a possible one hundred.

Despite being retired, I have not lost my curiosity, nor my interest in scientific research. I also enjoy reading good science fiction, which is why I have once again renewed my subscription to your magazine. Thanks,

Frank Webster
Detroit, MI

I'm sorry, but the limiting speed of light, in our Universe as we know it, has *been proven beyond the shadow of a doubt. In nearly a hundred years and countless observations of all kinds it has been upheld. We would have to go to extreme conditions that have remained untested (say, in a black hole) before there is even a chance (only a chance) of the limit being evaded.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I am a person who has subscribed to *IAsfm* for many months and I feel the obligation to write and tell about the superiority of your magazine. I read many types of material and find great joy in picking up the *IAsfm* each month. I act like a greedy child among hoards of candy.

I was especially pleased when reading the novella, "The Egg," in your January issue. It was my favorite story in the issue, while last month my favorite was the short story "Christmas Without Rodney." I thank you for coming up with the first exceptional magazine—really exceptional—because the quality goes on and on.

Kirsten Power, age 12
Fair Haven, NJ

I'm glad we're getting you when you're young, Kirsten. Grow with us and don't abandon us. Every once in a while I meet people who say, "I used to read science fiction when I was young." What they really mean is that they have decayed and they only watch football games on TV now. —Don't let that happen to you.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, Mr. Dozois, and Company,

This is the first Reader's Award I've voted for. It seemed that there was an overabundance of candidates in the 1988 issues. This perception results almost entirely from my own maturation as a reader, and *Asimov's* has been an integral part of the process. For this, I am deeply grateful.

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ACE
SEPTEMBER

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Now that the flattery is out of the way, let's move on to the "Frankenstein Complex." Specifically, Dr. Asimov's own "Christmas Without Rodney." We see that the humans have created robots in their own psychological image, capable of thoughts and dark emotions that plague the best of men. Thus far, these thoughts haven't been translated into physical action: when they are, humanity shall rue the day.

But let's look for a moment at the Robot Canon. Dr. Asimov, your latest entries are quite dichotomous. On one side, we have Andrew Martin the artist, and R. Daneel Olivaw the savior. Opposite them are Elvex the dreamer, Rodney the wishful thinker, and George-10, who isn't mindful of humans at all. I recall that in your early youth, you rejected the notion of robot-as-menace (the "Frankenstein Complex") and the result was "Robbie." Now, in your late youth, the pendulum has swung back, and there is an undercurrent of menace from these metal beings.

What lies in humanity's future? From *Caves of Steel* and *Foundation and Earth* it is clear that humanity must triumph. The question is, at what cost to itself? Harlan Ellison's Robot Pogroms, perhaps? Will some robots transcend the First Law without developing a Zeroth Law as Daneel did? Time, as always, will tell.

Sincerely,

Alan M. Dionne
Reston, VA

A good story-teller looks at both sides of everything. I recently wrote a tear-jerker about a dog, and I have also written a story about an incredibly evil cat—yet I dislike dogs and I adore cats. Back in 1947—over forty years ago—I published a story called "Little Lost Robot" in which a robot was the villain, and I was in my early youth then. I'm afraid that both my stories and I are more complex than you think.

—Isaac Asimov

To the Editors:

In your January '89 issue of *IAsfm*, letter writer Stanley Colton mentions IQ as being wholly inadequate as a measure of a person's ability, etc. I wouldn't argue this point; as a member of Mensa, I often have to remind my fellow Mensans that all our IQ score proves is that we're good at multiple choice tests. However, I have noticed that there are two things with which IQ does seem to have a strong correlation: a propensity to argue, and science fiction readership. Both on a local and a national scale, the proportion of science fiction readers in Mensa is much greater than among the population at large. Often, Mensans planning "Regional Gatherings" or other big events must check calendars of science fiction conventions to avoid presenting members with the dilemma of a donkey equidistant between two stacks of hay.

I don't know what the cause-and-effect relationship is that creates this correlation, and I certainly don't go around referring to myself as a genius just because I made it into Mensa, and I don't think Mr. Conyer, the original letter writer, should have, either, but I will point

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out that Mensa does make an effort to harness whatever abilities its members may have for the good of the future; the theme of our 1988 national Colloquium, here in Austin, was "Science and Society: Our Critical Challenges." My IQ alone might not make my opinion any better than anyone else's, but my attendance at such events may well make me better informed than many other people. IQ alone does not make a genius, but perhaps IQ with strong doses of effort, enthusiasm, and education does.

Officially, "Mensa has no opinions," but Mensans individually are opinionated as all get-out. Mr. Colton, please don't take Mr. Conyer's attitude as representative of that of all Mensa.

Sincerely,

R. Kelly Wagner
Editor, *Armadillo Literary Gazette*
Lonestar Mensa
Austin, TX

I think we ought to completely divorce "IQ" and "genius." A genius is someone who can do something so well, he seems more than human. Mozart was a genius; that's one thing on which everyone will agree. What was his IQ? The whole point of the play Amadeus *(which, of course, may not be accurate) was that in every respect but music, the man was a jerk.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

It is after several years' absence that I have returned to reading your magazine. As usual, the very first editorial of yours I read after the passage of these years was an

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editorial very carefully explaining why faster than light travel is not possible under our present understanding of the physical universe. While I concur with you in this area and feel that your efforts to enlighten the unenlightened are admirable, I am afraid it just won't fly with dyed-in-the-wool Trekkies.

However, a discussion on the probabilities of FTL is not the direct intent of this letter. I seem to recall that you have had a long standing dialogue with your readers as to what the best definition of science fiction is. I would like to enter the fray and put in my two cents' worth (or, if you will, with inflation what it is, my twenty-five cents' worth).

The definition which I would like to submit, unfortunately, does not originate with me. Rather, it is the now famous quotation of George Bernard Shaw, from his play, *John Bull's Other Island*. That quotation, more or less, is:

> Some men see things as they are and ask why? I dream of things that never were and say, why not?

I respectfully submit science fiction must have three elements: (1) the ability of the writer to dream of things that never were; (2) the ability of the writer to ask the question why not?; and (3) the ability of the writer to put it into words (or another art form) in a way that communicates meaning to the audience. It goes without saying that the better these three elements are put together, the better the science fiction is.

So to return to the opening salvo of this letter. It really does not make that much difference to good SF whether FTL travel is, or is not possible. If the writer wishes to stay within the limits of "hard" SF, then the writer keeps within the physical limits of the universe as it is known today. However, if the writer wishes to write "soft" SF, then he can dream of a time and place where FTL travel is possible. Quality science fiction has never been limited by the speed of light, only by the dreams of the SF writers, who, in turn, are simply people who can put their dreams into words better than most of us.

Sincerely,

Roy Goss, Jr.
Honolulu, HI

My own feeling is that it doesn't hurt to know enough science to be able to describe one's dreams convincingly. The Shaw quote, I believe, is from Back to Methuselah *and it's the Serpent in the Garden of Eden who says it.*

—Isaac Asimov

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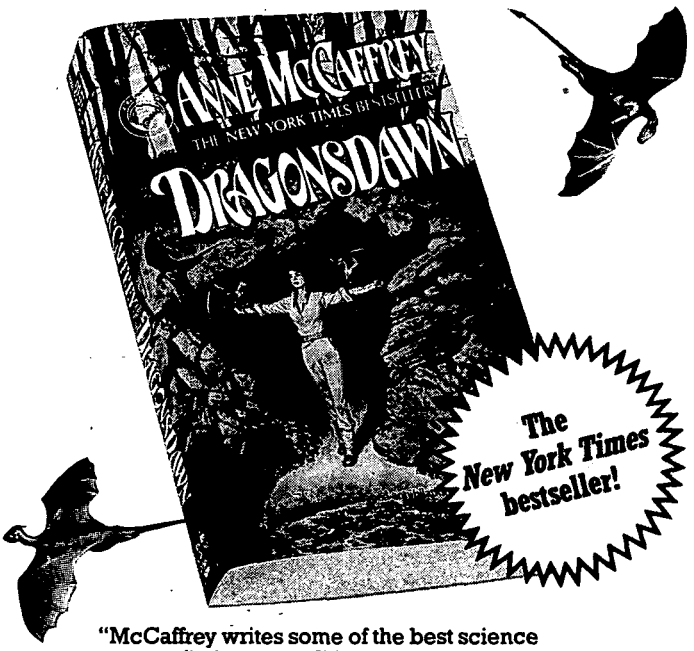

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NEAT STUFF

by Matthew J. Costello

Usually, when a pile of comics arrives for review, I check through the pile to see if any of the comics might be appropriate for my two offspring. Now, I'm not bringing my kids up in some moralistic cocoon. But, aged five and eight, they don't need to see what passes for mature comic books. Lots of blades, gaping mouths, frenzied stranglelholds. No, if that's adult stuff, it can wait.

So I flip through the pile, sending *The Real Ghostbusters* or an *Astro Boy* their way. And, recently, something called *Sam and Max, Freelance Police Special.* They leafed through it, laughing at things, bending the pages, and doing all those de-minting activities that render the comic forever obsolete as a valuable collector's item.

But, boy, were they having fun with it. Then, when I was having lunch one afternoon, I found myself face-to-face with the comic. The cover showed two animals, a floppy-eared dog in a suit and homburg, and a crazed-looking rabbit who seemed to have trouble staying in the 1958 police car. The front of the car was emblazoned with bumper stickers and a radiator adorned with the squashed remains of moths and other insects. I read the bumper stickers—"We Saw West Virginia's Mothman!" . . . "Walking Trees of Mystery" . . . "Circus Land '88."

I turned the page and learned that this comic, created, written, and drawn by Steve Purcell, was based on "Sam and Max Drive Around In a Car" by Bucky Kerouac. Hold on. Kerouac jokes? In a funny animal comic? Yes, what we had here was an existential *North By Northwest,* starring two refugees from Looney Tunes.

After Max, the rabbit, throws their office typewriter out the window, they load up their big tail-finned black and white with everything from Cheez-its to frozen burritos, ready for an Easy Rider expedition through the cultural deserts of our great land.

After Sam inquires why Max doesn't wear clothes—to which the rabbit has no answer—they hit the road, stopping at that great cultural landmark, the diner. Purcell provides a travelogue/guide to the diner, showing us the geological wonderland under the tables and counter tops, and wondering how waitresses get their hair such bizarre colors. After the stopover at the Greasy But Sincere Diner, it's off to another barren, godforsaken state and "Earl's Reptile Farm and

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Cheesy Dinosaur Park." On the road, some real freelance police action presents itself. Sam takes Max and sticks him out the window, knocking a menacing biker right off his Harley.

Other adventures and roadside attractions appear, from a place offering the World's Largest Prairie Dog as well as a Two-headed Receptionist. Sam and Max have to face pirates and a mechanic named Mr. Goodcrank before they can corner the market in genuine Tijuana Singing Frogs and head home.

And, say kids! There's lots of extras, including a two-page Sam & Max On the Road Board Game. One space reads "Mommy, Joey was sucked out the window!" Go Back Three Spaces and Find Him (If You Must). There's also an activity page that teaches you how to make your own lovable Max-Head puppet, and an educational page where Sam & Max present Our Bewildering Universe. Did you know that Sea Monkeys Are *Not* Primates?

Well, by this point I've either lost *my* audience or you simply *must* know where to get this wonderful comic. It's from Comico (1547 DeKalb Street, Norristown, PA 19401) and it's a very special issue. Something this good couldn't be a monthly. It's obviously a labor of love, filled with warm, satirical references to everything from stuffed alligators to the world famous Stuckey's.

By the way, I read *Sam & Max* in bed, folding the book back just the way we used to read comic books before everyone became concerned about their future value. Not only was it darned comfortable, leaving one hand ready to snatch up an Oreo or a gulp of milk, but it kept each page's surprises hidden until I flipped the book over.

After my abuse, the comic looks terrible . . . but I had a ball.

For those with a taste for something a bit darker, with more flesh on it, so to speak, I strongly recommend *Pigeons From Hell* ($7.95; Eclipse Books, PO Box 1099, Forestville, CA 95436). No, this isn't about a bad day in Greenwich Village. It's a graphic novel adaptation of the Robert E. Howard story. It's Howard's only horror tale, one much admired by H.P. Lovecraft and Stephen King.

The novel is sumptuous, told by terrifying, moody paintings by Scott Hamilton. I read it in two sittings, letting the spell it weaved linger a bit. I can't think of any comic I've read that has come as close to scaring me as this. There's one page —lights out everybody—that is all black except for the text. One turns the page with fingers oddly chilled . . . .

There's an introduction by Ramsey Campbell, and Scott Hamilton will also be working on Eclipse's adaptation of Clive Barker's *Tapping the Vein.* ●

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August 1988

As I drove out of the woods and down into Allouez, the feeling came back. It hit me in the stomach, pressed me against the side of the car. Even on that bright summer morning, the buildings were still gray, the people overweight, and the cars rusty. Lake Superior smelled like dead fish and I stifled the urge to roll up my window.

This wasn't the homecoming I had imagined. My father should still be alive, and all of my friends should be just as I had left them. I was supposed to be driving an expensive car with an expensive man—preferably my husband—by my side. Of course, I had planned to make it by now. Not too unrealistic: many politicians got their start in their late twenties. I was twenty-eight and had completed law school. But I was working in Legal Aid, shunning television cameras and ignoring friends who wanted to give me "important" cases.

I drove under the viaduct where we had been that wild drunken night of the Senior Prom. The memories here were untapped and dangerous; I had run away from this town the night after my high school graduation and had never looked back.

I pulled out the map Johnny had sent and leaned it against the steering wheel. I turned down the grid-like streets, knowing vaguely where he lived. And then I found it, on what used to be a tree-lined road a few miles north of East Junior High School. Johnny lived in the Victorian lumber baron's home that had been converted into apartments back when I was a kid.

Johnny was sitting on the porch. A chill ran through me. He had probably just been waiting; after all, I told him what day I would arrive. But his presence made that oppressed feeling even stronger. It reminded me of all those days when I would pick up the phone to call him only to find him already waiting on the other end; nights when I would walk over to his house and he would be on the porch, his mother saying that Johnny knew I was on my way; and even the letter with the map arriving the day I mailed him my letter telling him I was coming.

It seemed, in this town, that nothing changed.

February 1978

Snow glittered on the hills of Duluth. I stood on the rock beach overlooking Lake Superior and rubbed my hands against my open cloth jacket. The chill ran deep into my fingers, making the bones in my palms ache. I looked over at the car. Johnny was curled against the passenger window, his black hair crinkled against the glass. He said he had been

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up all night reading, but I wondered. Sometimes he showed up at my house, his eyes all puffy and red. Once I had opened up his journal and read a passage about which would be a quicker death, pills or sliding a razor blade across his wrists. Sometimes I wanted to check his skin, to see if it had been marred.

I got back into the car and kicked three empty beer cans off the floor on the driver's side. Their clatter against the concrete roadside made Johnny stir and sit up. "What're we doing, Carren?" he mumbled sleepily.

"Driving up to Enger Tower."

"It snowed."

I shrugged. "I'm a good driver."

He stretched and sat up, not questioning me. I wondered what he would say if he knew that my tires were bald and the last time I had climbed the hill, the car had slid back nearly ten feet along Skyline Drive.

I slammed the door shut and the car rocked with the impact. I started up, cranked the Doobie Brothers on the AM radio, and slid out into traffic. The steering wheel hummed under my fingers. I was a good driver—when I wanted to be.

"Do you ever think what you're going to do when you get out of school?"

I glanced over at him. He had asked the question suddenly, blurted it out as if he had been thinking about it for a long time.

"First woman President of the United States, I guess," I said. I made myself sound casual, but I really wasn't. I was going to be someone. I had it all planned. "How 'bout you?"

"I don't know." He kept staring out the window as we crossed the High Bridge. The black waters of Lake Superior sparkled below us. "Things have changed a lot lately."

I looked over at him. He sounded so sad that I wanted to touch his hair, pull him over to me, soothe him. He was supposed to be the successful one. I knew what his father had planned: college, a career, a large family. But I didn't touch him. That sort of thing was off-limits for best friends, especially friends as good as we were.

The roads going up the hill shone wetly. Large chunks of salt and sand covered the surface. It was going to be tricky, getting those bald tires up there, a true test of my skill. I turned the wheel when Johnny put his hand on mine.

"Pull over," he said.

"What?" I asked, wondering if he knew about the bald tires, about the treacherous drive ahead.

"Pull this goddamn thing over." He only swore when he was scared. I yanked the wheel to the right and stopped the car on the shoulder beside a warehouse overlooking the harbor.

"Okay, what is it?"

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I expected him to say something about me being stupid, but he just leaned forward and looked up the hill. His lips were pressed together so tightly that they were turning white.

"Johnny, for Crissake—"

"Shut up!" he snapped.

I sat back, more puzzled than angry. He would tell me in a minute. He always did. Then I heard squealing breaks, someone scream from a few blocks away, the wail of distant sirens. A vein beat against Johnny's forehead. He was clutching the dash with white-knuckled hands. Something thumped up on the hill, squeaking metal. I turned and saw the truck.

It etched itself against my memory in a single bounce: A new, shiny red pick-up with Minnesota plates, its front end scratched and slightly dented, and the driver, his hair plastered against his skull, his eyes wide open, teeth clenched, clutching the steering wheel to his chest as if he could pull back and the truck would fly like something out of James Bond.

Then it went past, going almost too fast to see, swerving to avoid cars on the road Johnny made me pull off of, the last road before the harbor, too crowded for an out-of-control truck. He drove toward the harbor, hitting barrels to reduce his speed, succeeding only in sliding on the ice, finally spinning out of control and sailing into the cold waters. Cop cars were already making their way down the hill, and a single ambulance followed, its lights flashing.

"Why didn't he jump?" I whispered.

"He could have when he lost his brakes, back up at the top of the hill." Johnny was staring at the water. The cop cars had stopped. "But he decided to stay in, to make sure that the truck wouldn't take anyone else out."

I didn't ask how Johnny knew all that stuff. I had learned, in the last few weeks, that he wouldn't tell me. "He going to be all right?"

"Depends on your view of death," Johnny said. He took a deep breath, looked at me, and then passed out.

August 1988

I pulled over beside the curb, checking the rear-view and side mirrors constantly to make sure that I was parking straight. Somewhere I had lost confidence in my driving, enough so that even parking curbside made me feel awkward. I grabbed my duffel, locked the passenger's side and climbed out of the car.

Johnny stood beside the house. Over the years he had grown into his

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gaunt body, filled it out, made it his own. He looked like he lived in it now. When I'd left, it had seemed as if he were just renting.

"Always knew you would be tall and leggy."

I looked down my five-foot-four frame. "Always knew you could be wrong about things."

We grinned at each other. It wasn't quite like old times, but it was close enough. I stepped up the curb and he walked down the grass. When we met on the sidewalk, we hugged.

I felt like I was holding half a stranger. He used a new cologne and shampoo, slightly musky and oriental, but his smell remained the same, the dry, dusty scent of summer on the desert. I had never had a label for it before. I did now.

"Trust you to come a week after the reunion," he said into my shoulder.

I started. I had forgotten about the reunion. When Anderson, my father's attorney, had called me yet again about the house, I had decided that I couldn't let the place sit empty any longer. Interesting that I had subconsciously chosen to return to Superior on the very weekend I had promised to return so many years ago. "I came, didn't I?"

"Rennie's party is tonight."

"Shit." I pulled out of the hug. The old gang back together. A party planned ten years before. A check-in, to see if the experiment had worked. Perhaps it had with the others; I had lost touch. As for myself, the importance of being someone—doing something to "make a difference"—had ended the night I left this place. My father never understood. To the day he died, he wondered what had happened to his promising little girl.

"So, how was the reunion?" I asked, a shade too brightly.

Johnny shrugged, a touch too casual. "One big party."

"Everybody going bald and getting fat?"

"And having kids. All except Glonski. She trimmed up. The hit of the place. No one recognized her."

"Glonski, huh?" Josie Glonski had been my first debate partner. She hadn't been the fattest girl in school, but she had been the most obvious one.

"Everybody asked about you. I didn't have much to tell them."

"Not much to tell," I said. Suddenly I was feeling restless. I wanted to be away from the house, away from Johnny, back in my car and driving as fast as I could. I had spent ten years forgetting this part of my life had ever happened. And yet, here I was, returning, as pre-programmed as a salmon on its death-spawn.

Johnny picked up the restlessness immediately. He grabbed my duffel. "Let me put this inside," he said, "and then we can stomp some old ground." I nodded but didn't go inside. Instead, I faced the street. One

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block from here, on December 18, 1973, Daniel West had kissed me on the way home from the Christmas dance. It had been two below that night, and I had been a shapeless wonder in my parka. But Danny hadn't cared. He pulled off my knit cap, stuck it in his pocket, and kissed me with all the aplomb a thirteen-year-old could muster. And I had savored that kiss for months. So had he. He had never given me my cap back.

"Ready?" Johnny said. He touched my arm as if he had been standing beside me for a long time. I looked at him sideways and wondered if he could pick up memories, too. "I'm driving."

I suppressed a sigh. And so it began. "Okay." I followed him around the side to the driveway. A large motorcycle was parked on the gravel rut. He handed me a red helmet and strapped the blue one on his own head.

I put the helmet on and felt as if the world had constricted yet again. If I got squeezed any more, I wouldn't be able to move.

I climbed on behind Johnny, and felt the machine vibrate as it roared to life. I wasn't fond of motorcycles, but I was willing, in this town, to try almost anything. He gave me a thumbs up, and then he pulled out onto the street.

Old neighborhoods whizzed by. Glimpses of memories too fast to be more than an impression. Somewhere down those roads sat the house I grew up in, the one the attorney no longer wanted to manage. I shivered thinking about that. But it wasn't until we turned on 28th Street that my stomach began to cramp. As we got closer to good old Superior Senior High School, the world in front of me shimmered. Even before the shimmering stopped, I knew what I would see. SSHS on a busy weekday morning before the first bell. Cars, kids, teachers. And none of them had aged a day since I left.

January 1978

Music floated from the cafeteria through the Link into the empty halls. A tinny piano accompanying Danny West's voice, trying to sound deep and powerful: *If I were a rich man . . .*

I stood outside the chemistry lab and listened. Music rehearsal for the winter musical. The first play I had missed in all of my years of school. JB, the drama coach, said I could stage manage when I was through with the biochemistry project, but that wasn't the same. I liked being the center, the front, on stage with people applauding. JB had told me that I could have had Hodel or Golda, key roles in *Fiddler on the Roof,* but I had committed myself to this project too long ago to give up during the last phase.

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"You coming, Carren?"

All four of the boys were looking at me. Dale was the one who had spoken. He was tall and slim, his dark eyes glinting with excitement. He sat on the big black desk in the front of the room and kicked the wooden frame with his feet. Five pyrex beakers with a clear liquid in the bottom sat beside him on the Formica surface. Craig was leaning against the desk, Johnny was staring at the formula papers, and Rennie was pacing nervously back and forth.

We called ourselves the four musketeers plus one. The guys assumed I was Constance, and while I didn't mind being compared with Raquel Welch, I liked to think of myself as another D'Artagnan out to, however poorly, save the day.

"Yeah." I came inside the room and closed the door. The click echoed in the stillness. I took a deep breath, inhaling fumes of long-dead projects. My hands were shaking.

"You got the right proportions and everything?" Rennie asked for probably the fifth time.

"Just checked it again," Dale said. His Nikes were making a thudding sound against the wood.

I stopped in front of the desk and leaned on one of the chairs. When people tried this in the movies, the mixture foamed and looked ominous. The liquid in those beakers seemed like water. "I'm a little scared."

Johnny looked up. A strand of hair had fallen across his eyes. "I don't have a good feeling about this either."

"Look," I said, rubbing my hands across my jeans. "We have the papers done. We did the projections. You're not supposed to test this kind of thing. Mr. Diller would have a bird if he knew we were up here."

"That's why he doesn't know," Rennie said. His eyes were round and clear. The eyes of an innocent.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," Dale said. He jumped off the desk and stood in front of me. "None of us do."

"I knew you guys would chicken out." Rennie took Dale's place on the top of the desk. Rennie's fingers drummed nervously. "You forgot the whole reason we're doing this."

"It's a stupid reason. Dumb little pipe dream." Craig sat in the desk nearest him and stuck his feet into the aisle. He was stocky, the most athletic of all of us. "As if drinking a magic potion can make our lives better."

"It's not a magic potion. You know exactly what's in here—"

"Yeah," Craig said, "Wing of bat, eye of newt—"

"It probably won't do a damn thing." Dale smiled at me. "I was hoping more for the placebo effect myself."

"Well, we just jinxed that," Johnny said.

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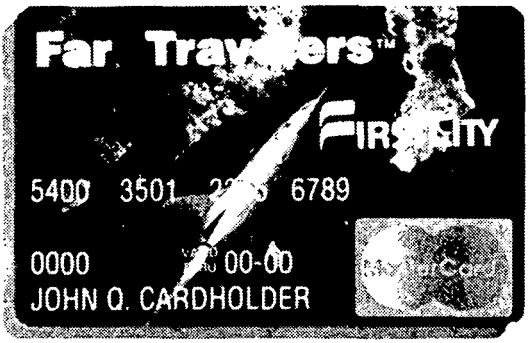
The Shape of Things to Come



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Dale ignored him. "Come on, Carren, what can it hurt?"

"She's got a point," Craig said. "We don't know what we're fucking with."

I sighed. I knew all the arguments. We had been over them twenty times. It was no more dangerous than mushrooms or LSD. And we weren't going for a one-time hallucination.

I grabbed a beaker. Rennie took one and so did Dale. Johnny stared at me for a long moment, then took his. Finally Craig picked one up.

"All for one," Rennie said, lifting his beaker in a toast. The half ounce of liquid sloshed against the sides.

"And one for all," we responded, knocking the beaker back as if it contained a shot of tequila. The stuff passed through my mouth so quickly all I tasted was something faint and burning. The burning became a tingling in my throat and stomach. I sat down.

"I don't feel anything," Craig said.

"How's it supposed to feel when you get smarter?" Rennie asked.

No one answered. We sat and stared at the clock over the observation deck. It clicked as each minute passed. It had clicked fifteen times when Dale closed the notebook. "I suppose we should stick together in case something happens," he said. "Anyone for a pizza?"

"Nothing's going to happen," Johnny said softly. "At least nothing anyone would expect."

August 1988

Funny how some things never changed. Johnny pulled the bike into the driveway in front of the gym area. The emptiness of the parking lot and the quality of the light made it feel as if it were a Saturday afternoon in early fall. The school was dormant, waiting for Monday when the students would revive it again. I got off the bike, walked up the concrete sidewalk and pressed my nose against the glass doors. The trophies still stood against the wall, and through the small break, I caught the vague scent of chlorine.

Superior Senior High School had been built in the late sixties with red brick. The front was a circle, hollow in the middle, with classrooms around the outside. That was attached to the rectangular gymnasium and cafeteria area by the Link, a glass hallway made up of doors. Between classes, most kids used to hang out in the Link because it was the central area, the best way to see everyone. I wanted to go inside, walk the empty hallways, smell the sweat, chlorine, and cleaning products mixed with the musty smell of books and paper.

Johnny stood beside me, a key in his hand.

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"Where'd you get that?"

His smile was pained. "I'm the night janitor here now."

"Jesus, John."

He shrugged. "I roamed around, did a few other things for a while. Came back here last year. Almost like something called me, you know?"

I did know, but I didn't want to admit it. Johnny unlocked the door, pushed it open and crossed the hall. He opened a wall cabinet near the trophies and shut off an alarm system. Apparently some things had changed.

But not much. The smell was as I remembered it, and with it came the memory of my first encounter with the school. I couldn't have been more than twelve, my swimsuit wrapped in a towel under my arms, waiting for my friends to show me the locker room. The pool had community swimming all summer, and I had been determined to take advantage of it. The light came in from the large glass doors at the end of the hallway, and through it, I could see the lockers standing tall and proud along the polished tile floor. My locker at the grade school had been tiny, little girl-sized, and I hadn't yet seen the junior high school.

Now, standing in the same hallway sixteen years later, the lockers looked small. The whole place had a feeling of age, of memories and violence, and of lost dreams. I turned to Johnny and put a hand on his arm. *I couldn't imagine working there every night, seeing students, realizing how young they were, watching as the old memories got whittled away, detail by detail, only to slap him again as signs for the Senior Prom went up every spring.*

He didn't move, but stared straight ahead, as if he were facing the same memories as I was. "Why did you leave?" he asked.

The question didn't make me angry as I expected it to. Over the years, I had rehearsed this moment a thousand times, thinking of a hundred different answers, and never had I predicted the one that came out of my mouth. "I had to, Johnny."

He nodded, as if my non-answer told him what he needed to know. Then he shook himself like some people did as they rose out of sleep, and began my tour of the high school.

Mostly we didn't say a word, just walked past rooms. I half expected to see Danny West rounding a corner or Josie Glonski sitting in the Link. But the building was empty except for us. And the ghosts. Finally, we walked up the stairs and stopped outside the chemistry lab. He opened the door, and we stepped inside.

The sharp scents of chemicals I could no longer identify rose and then disappeared as my nose became accustomed to them. The room seemed bigger than I remembered and was obviously modernized. The place I remembered had been cramped, so cramped that Dale's voice had sounded

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loud in my ear, and I had felt an almost physical pressure from the three others.

Come on, Carren, what could it hurt?

I had gone over that scene, that one memory, so many times in my mind that it didn't seem real. It had seemed to us then, with our ever-so-logical teenage brains, that if lithium helped manic-depressives and other chemicals eased unbalanced brains, then certain chemicals would hike brain power, as if the brain were not a complex organic instrument, but a vial of solution that had been diluted by evolution to a weakened state. Perhaps we had caught a bit of sixties insanity as children, believing that drugs were everything—expanding consciousness instead of limiting it—or perhaps we would have come to this conclusion anyway, the combination of the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time. The biochemistry project took hours and hours and hours of work after school. I dropped out of drama for it, Rennie quit the basketball team, Dale nearly flunked English lit, and Craig did flunk his driving test, at least the first one. Only Johnny took the whole thing in stride.

"Looks different," I said at last.

"Yeah." Johnny leaned against a black lab station and pushed aside a bunsen burner.

"How is everyone?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I was the only one who showed up."

"Then how do you know there'll be something at Rennie's?"

He looked at me. I had been stupid to ask, and we both knew it.

April 1978

I was sitting on my front porch in shorts, smoking a cigarette and trying not to cough. The forty-degree weather felt almost warm. Dale sat cross-legged on the sidewalk. Above us, Rennie slept against the door, a pose that was becoming so common that Johnny had started calling him Dormouse.

"I vote we ditch them," Dale said.

I flicked the cigarette into the rose bushes, the only thing that remained from my runaway mother. "Let's give 'em fifteen. It's been taking them forever lately."

So we waited. Somehow it wouldn't have felt right to go anywhere without Craig and Johnny. Much as I liked Dale and Rennie, they simply weren't enough. It was as if it took the five of us to for anything to be enjoyable these days.

Craig's car pulled up, a white 1962 Ford Falcon without a spot of rust. He owned three of them and cobbled the spare parts into the working

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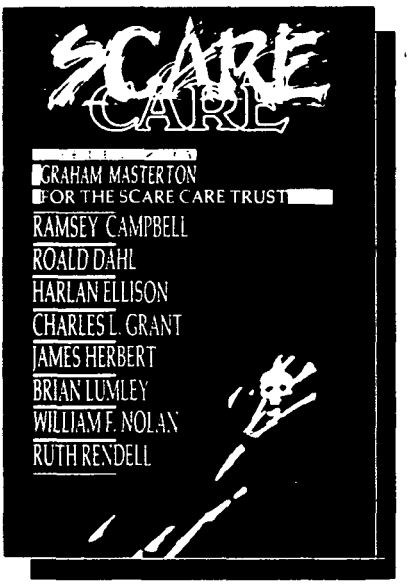

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one whenever it broke down. He was alone. Dale and I looked at each other. We had planned the outing, the five of us, so that we wouldn't spend Prom night moping around the house. I could have gone with Trevor Fredericks or Danny West, but I opted to be with the group.

I got up and brushed off the back of my shorts. "Where's Johnny?"

"Don't know." Craig said. He held up two six-packs. Craig always offered people something when he lied.

Dale and I looked at each other. We both knew what had happened. They had had another fight. Ever since that night in the chem lab, Craig had grown increasingly angry at Johnny. Johnny was the only one who showed any signs of change.

I tapped Rennie and we walked down the steps. Suddenly I wasn't so sure I wanted to be with these guys. I wished I had let Trevor take me to the dance—watching him pin a corsage on my spaghetti strap, feeling his broad fingers brush the top of my breast, seeing where that led. Except I knew where that would lead. I had watched friends go down that path, former SSHS football stars disappear into Murphy Oil Company and become fat within two years. Somehow, Prom Night seemed like destiny and I was determined to make mine.

I grabbed one of the six-packs out of Craig's hand as I got in the front seat beside him. "Let's get Johnny. It should be the five of us."

Craig flushed as his anger rose and then he checked it. I glanced at the other two, wondering if they felt the radiation as strongly as I did. But Rennie was busy pulling a beer from a pack in the back seat. Dale had already started his. It looked like it would be a night of heavy drinking and not much talking. That was okay. We had been talking too much lately.

Craig put his hand on my knee. His palm was warm against my bare thigh. I twisted toward the back seat and moved away at the same time, hoping that he wouldn't notice. Dale handed me a beer which I passed to Craig.

"Too bad Johnny isn't here," Rennie said with a yawn. "He's the one who can find people without looking."

"I know where he is," I said. The car started moving. Trees touched with early evening sunlight whizzed by.

"Yeah, sure." Craig was clutching the wheel so tightly that his knuckles had turned white. "What, are you psychic now, too?"

"No." I scooched even farther away from him.

"So where is he?" Dale had become my ally. Somewhere in all of this, only he seemed to understand how pinched by the group I was beginning to feel.

I leaned against the car door. The armrest dug into my side. "Down near the trailer park in Allouez."

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"What the hell's he doing there?" Craig asked. He reached back and grabbed a beer, one hand on the steering wheel and his gaze on the back seat.

I sat up and watched the road, ready to grab control of the car. "He's just walking." Johnny always walked when he was upset. Then he didn't have to focus on the world around him, as if movement kept him sane. And if he and Craig had fought, they would have fought near Johnny's house—at the trailer park.

Craig's attention was back on the road again. He steered with his knees as he pulled open the ring-top on the beer and proceeded to chug. Fortunately the traffic on Highway 2 was thin, because he had speeded up.

I heard the clink of cans in the back seat as both Rennie and Dale finished their first. They were almost done with their second by the time we reached the viaduct.

Johnny was walking on the shoulder of the highway. In the dimness of twilight, he seemed like a shadow moving across the road. His walk was so familiar; the brisk clip, the no-nonsense posture. Craig flicked on his headlights, and Johnny reflected the glare like a phosphorescent ghost.

"There he is," I said, but Craig didn't seem to hear me. He aimed the car down the highway, sliding onto the shoulder. His foot pressed into the gas pedal, concentration heavy on his face.

Dale leaned forward from the back seat and wrenched the wheel. The car swerved slightly, almost going into the other lane before it righted itself. "Cahrist!" he said. "Stop this goddamn junker."

I snapped alert as if I had been in a sound sleep. Craig pulled over. My temples pounded. A headache was building behind my brain. I reached back and grabbed a beer for myself.

"You could have killed him, you asshole." Dale's car door thunked open. "I'm driving."

"No." Craig spoke thickly. "I'm okay now."

"Bullshit." Dale was half in, half out of the car. "You're drunk and pissed off, and in no state to drive."

"He's not drunk," I said. The others stopped and looked at me.

"So you let Craig drive, Carren?" Johnny was peering in the door. "You should know better."

"Cut it out," I said. "I'm not responsible for everything around here. You're the one who got him mad."

"Oh, but you are responsible," Johnny said. He pushed on Dale. "Get back in. I'm coming, too."

Dale climbed in the back seat, and Johnny climbed in beside him. As he slammed the door closed, the air filled with the scent of whiskey, but

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Johnny didn't seem drunk. I was clutching my hands together, my fingernails digging into my palms. Craig put the car in gear, drove a few blocks to the Black Steer Restaurant, and turned around in the parking lot. I was beginning to feel giddy. Rennie had passed out.

Craig crumpled his beer can and tossed it out the window. Then he reached back, grabbed the remaining can of the six-pack, guzzled the beer and tossed out that can. My giddiness had grown worse. I should have stopped him from driving. Johnny was right. Craig would do what I said. He belched, wiped his mouth, and said, "You ready, kids?"

I didn't nod so much as let my head droop. Craig pulled out onto the street, revved engine and shoved his foot against the floor. The car peeled forward, heading toward the viaduct at top speed. Buildings whizzed past us and suddenly a blast of cold air fanned my back. I turned. Johnny had opened his door. He was leaning on it, riding the door frame straight toward the viaduct. If we went under, the door would shear off.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Dale grabbed Johnny's legs and tugged. The door swayed slightly.

It felt as if I had swallowed my heart and it was beating in my throat. I slapped Rennie as I turned around. He shook his head and, almost brainlessly, yanked Johnny's ankle. A sharp stab of fear pierced my headache and the cobwebs in my brain. My best friend was going to die. I half leaned over the back seat, grabbed Johnny's thigh and pulled. The door closed on Johnny's back as we zoomed through the viaduct and under the overpass into East End. Not even a nick.

"Stop the goddamn car," Dale yelled. Craig kept driving. "Stop the goddamn car or so help me god I'm going to kill you, Craig Stener, you asshole!"

I couldn't let go of Johnny's thigh, so I kicked Craig. "Stop the car, stupid."

The car swerved and then righted itself. "Stop the fucking car," I said.

Pain echoed in my back, my side and down my leg. The car slowed and gradually stopped on the shoulder. Craig opened his door and got out, holding his hip—the place my foot must have contacted his body. We finally let go of Johnny. The door creaked open, and he almost fell. He made himself stand, slowly. His shirt was creased into his back, and he seemed to be having trouble drawing his breath.

"Jesus, what the hell were you doing, man?" Rennie asked.

"Nothing." Johnny shook his head and nearly fell over. "Just like from now on." He grinned, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Some people, they make it by the time they're fifty. And some people make it before they're eighteen. Did you guys know that?"

His words depressed me. I didn't want my greatest claim to fame being salutatorian for the class of 1978. "Get in the car."

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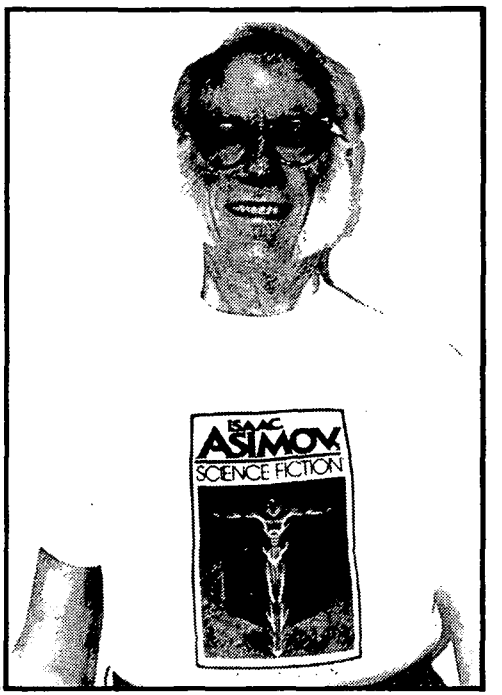

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He looked at me. "No real reason to now. I could drown in Lake Superior tonight and it wouldn't make a fucking load of difference. My folks would be upset, but they'd get over it. So would you guys. The world wouldn't change."

"Get in the car, Johnny," I repeated, making sure that my voice was softer.

He shook his head, but got into the car anyway. "I don't even have the guts to prove my own theory," he said.

Dale pushed Rennie out of the way, opened the other door and climbed up front. "I never realized you got suicidal when you were drunk," he said to Johnny. But I knew that it wasn't just when he was drunk. Johnny felt more and more like a failure, and somehow the experiment had simply made things worse.

Dale made Craig slide over next to me. Craig's eyes were glazed, and I knew that if we didn't get him home soon, he'd be sick. "Great prom night, huh?" Dale said.

"Oh, yeah." I was trying to keep a distance between myself and Craig. "Something to remember for the rest of our lives."

August 1988

I pulled the car up in front of Rennie's house. The house—Rennie's parents' house, really—hadn't changed. It stood in the center of the block on East Fourth Street, surrounded by oak and bush pine. The little arched doorway draped in vines hinted at the house's redness. Rennie's dad's Studebaker sat in the gravel driveway, the collector's plate gleaming proudly against the shining chrome.

Johnny got out and stared at the house for a moment before closing the car door. A chill ran through my back. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps, over all of these years, Johnny had lost that gift Craig had nearly killed him for. Or perhaps he was as nervous as I was.

I climbed out. The air smelled faintly of pine and damp earth. I took a deep breath. If we were wrong—if Johnny was wrong—we could have a short visit with Rennie's parents, and then a quiet dinner somewhere unfamiliar.

Johnny waited for me on the walk. I took his arm, and together we crossed the cobbled brick. The lower step was cracked and Johnny nearly tripped. I grabbed his arm tighter. When we reached the top step, I was the one who knocked.

Voices sounded inside the house, and so did some soft jazz. I was about to knock again when Rennie pulled the door open.

"Carren," he breathed. His face was soft, rounded, like the face of a

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child yet to lose his baby fat. "And Johnny. Jesus." He stared at us as if he couldn't believe we were there, and then he stepped back. "Come on in. Craig and Dale are already inside."

We walked through the narrow entranceway into the small living room. A fire was burning in the fireplace. The Risk game sat on the table, unopened, as it had so many Friday nights in our past. Craig was hunched nervously on the rocking chair beside the window. Dale had poured himself a drink and was examining the photo rack Rennie's parents had mounted on the wall. Those pictures, the VCR on top of the television, and the touch-tone telephone were all that showed ten years had passed.

"I half expected you, John," Rennie said. "But where did you find Carren?"

"She found me." Johnny extracted himself from my grip and sat on the couch.

I still stood in the center of the living room. Craig wouldn't look up, but I could feel Dale's gaze on me. I met it, and was startled to see the intelligence that had lined his features. "We've been wondering about you, Carren." He swished his drink and looked down at the swirling liquid as if, with that one sentence, he had said too much.

"Suppose you made good." Craig tossed the toothpick he had been using into the fire. He still wouldn't face me.

"I don't know what made good means," I said.

Silence followed my words. We were together again, the four musketeers plus one, ten years later—or was it ten years after? It didn't matter. We were ten years strangers, with the memory of friendship, or something similar.

"Where's your parents?" Johnny asked Rennie.

Rennie walked over to the bar built into the wall. "They took my wife out. Said old friends are better seen alone." He took a glass off the shelf against the mirror. "Get you guys anything?"

I shook my head, and so did Johnny. It was hard to imagine Rennie with a wife. It was hard to imagine that I was in this room with these people. Craig leaned back in the rocker. The wood creaked. "I still want to hear about Carren."

"If I'd made good, you would have heard about me," I snapped. All four men looked at me. Each face held something—fear and a little regret. And something that I couldn't read.

"You should have stayed," Dale said for all of them.

I turned away from him. "I'll have that drink now. Scotch, if you have it."

Rennie took a decanter from the back of the bar, uncorked it, sniffed the contents, and poured. His hands were shaking. "I suppose," Dale said,

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"since we all showed up as originally planned that we should continue with the original plan."

"What? Compare notes? See how well we've done since our little experiment?" Craig stood up. He had become beefy, almost fat, but he moved with a sense of power. "Okay. We'll start with the failure first." He braced himself near the fireplace. "I'm here only because I got paroled six months ago." He finally met my gaze. "Manslaughter. My attorney tried to claim self-defense, but I couldn't help him since I had blacked the whole thing out. I managed to get time off for good behavior, amazing, they think, since I have an anger problem. Impressed, aren't you, Carren?"

I didn't know why he was picking on me. I had done better, yes, but not that much considering all the promises I had made to myself. "Craig, look—"

"Shit. Carren speaks, we all listen. Hasn't changed at all. You know how hard it was for me to interrupt you just then?" He ran a hand nervously over his thick arm. "Shit."

"I've been going to the sleep clinic in Minneapolis," Rennie said. He shot a quick glance at Craig, as if hoping the soft words would calm Craig down. "They didn't diagnose me until last year. Narcolepsy. I'm taking speed a couple times a day. It's helped."

"I'll say." Dale grinned. "You should see his wife!"

Rennie blushed. "Dale helped me find the sleep clinic. He's been working at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. One of their youngest doctors ever. Everyone says he's damn good."

"Shut up." Dale smiled as he spoke. He walked over to Craig. "You know, anger is sometimes caused by a chemical imbalance, too."

Craig moved closer to the fire, his back half turned to the group. "One success, two if you count marriage. You're not married, are you, Carren?"

"No," I said softly. I had never even been asked—or found anyone I wanted to ask. Funny, I had never felt sad about it until Craig had mentioned it.

"Neither am I," Johnny said. "I'm working as the janitor over at Senior High."

"Shit." Dale whistled through his teeth. "I expected you to be working at some high class brokerage firm by now—or doing something with those prognosticating skills of yours."

Johnny just smiled. "I told you ten years ago I wasn't going to amount to anything. At any given decision point, our futures spread before us like a handful of rainbows. Each rainbow carries its own network of paths. Once we've made the decision, the paths narrow, until often, there is only one. From eighteen on, it seems, I've only had little rainbows. Somehow I discarded the big ones a long time ago."

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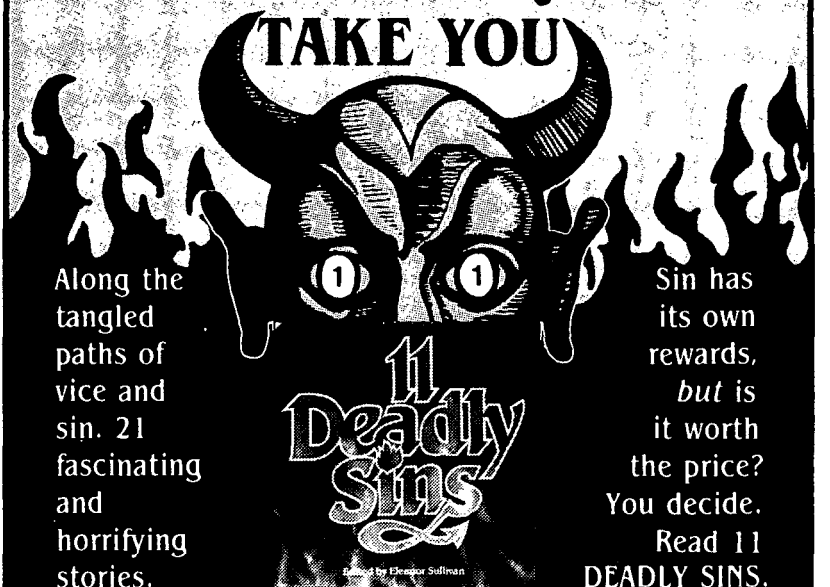

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We all let that sink in. I took the drink from Rennie. The glass was cool against my palm. I didn't want it so much to drink as to hold.

"And what about you, Carren?" Craig asked. "I haven't heard anything yet."

"I'm an attorney." I took a sip of the Scotch. It burned against my throat much as that clear liquid had ten years before. "I work for Legal Aid in Milwaukee. I make eighteen thousand dollars per year, and I live alone. I have always lived alone. I went to law school and graduated summa cum laude. That's my claim to fame. I haven't done anything either."

Craig let out a series of short barking laughs. He turned and faced us fully, still laughing. We watched. It took him a moment to catch his breath. Then he shook his head. "Rainbows, janitors, and angry drunks. I expected us all to be on the road to something by now. But I suppose I should have known better once Carren left."

I squeezed the glass between my fingers. I could feel the fragile sides and knew that in a minute they would crack. "Don't blame it all on me."

"Why not?" He leaned against the sofa—an animal movement, practiced relaxation hiding a potential spring. "We were a unit. And you could have made us combine our strengths, use what we had—"

"You were bickering so badly about who got the best deal, it was all I could do to hold us together."

Craig rested his hands on his knees. "You could have stopped the bickering."

"I did." I waited for him to say something, but a slow flush crept along his cheeks. Finally I set my glass down. The Scotch spilled over the rim, leaving a small puddle on the coffee table.

Rennie grabbed a napkin and placed it on the spill. Dale set his drink down, too. "We always listened to you," he said. "You could have told us to stop."

The squeezed feeling was growing, pressure in the back of my head and chest. "I was an eighteen-year-old girl," I said. "I didn't know if I should wear a bra or not, or what my dad would do if I came home late too many nights in a row, and you wanted me to control our lives, choose our destiny and lead us all into the promised land? Jesus, that's as stupid as drinking a little scientifically mixed magic potion so that we can raise our IQ points."

"It worked for me," Dale said softly.

"Yeah, and it gave Johnny ESP and made Craig angry and made Rennie sleep. I'm the only one it didn't help, and because of that, you all expect me to lead you, guide you, as if I got an extra helping of wisdom by not getting anything at all."

"Oh, you got something," Johnny said. He was sprawled along the

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couch, his body as taut as Craig's. "You were always attractive and interesting, Carren, but you were never the center of attention until that night."

"Charisma," Dale said. "So much of it that I can't believe you've managed to hide all these years."

I stared at him, and as I stared, I started to shake. All the people, wanting me to do this project or to help with that. All the men who approached me, cautiously, in bars or at dances. All the years of saying no or closing my door or turning away. People wouldn't leave me alone. And somehow, I thought everyone suffered from it. Or, at least, I had convinced myself of that after graduation night so long ago.

May 1978

Cars littered the parking lot behind the gym. People stood outside, holding robes wrapped in clear thin plastic. My father dropped me off and went to park. I carried my robe over my arm and walked cautiously across the unevenly paved sidewalk. My high heels clattered against the concrete, the sound almost hidden by the rise and fall of excited voices.

"Hey! Carren!" A couple of the girls hurried over and asked my opinion on the way their graduation robes looked. I straightened one collar, decided not to tell Glonski that she looked like a balloon, and kept walking. People continued to greet me as I walked in the side door beside the orchestra room. Inside, I could hear the squeals of violins, the rise and fall of loose-lipped trumpets, and the squeak of a piccolo. Someone was banging Middle C on the piano in order to get everyone to quiet down and tune. For the first time, I wasn't in the orchestra at graduation. I was in the procession itself.

The students were gathering under the signs bearing the first initial of their last names. I scanned the large hallway for a "B," finally found it and pushed my way toward it. As I passed the "S's," Craig grabbed my arm.

"Meet me after the ceremony."

I pulled away. "I'm going to Trevor's graduation party. And then I'm heading home."

"Come on, Carren. The others will be there."

His acne-covered face seemed serious. I could say no, but that would leave me wondering what they had planned. Besides, these guys were supposed to be my best friends.

I sighed. "Just as long as it doesn't last too long. I really do want to go to Trevor's."

"It won't. We'll be at Rennie's." I could see the envy on his face. Trevor

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always held the most popular parties, and no one was allowed to crash. A few guys tried a year or so ago and found themselves ostracized by the entire school. Trevor didn't take kindly to people who didn't listen to him.

I walked past him, and made my way to the "B" line. We were crowded against the trophies, the second row to walk in. "Better put your robe on, Carren," Mr. Bellen, the principal, said as he hurried past. I nodded. I balanced the hanger on top of the trophy case, and ripped open the thin plastic surrounding the robe. It was navy blue with a white collar. My cap had two tassels attached to it: a white one to designate my honor society membership and a pink one to show that I was graduating second in my class. On this night, I was relieved that I was graduating second. Danny West, the valedictorian, had to make a speech. I had no idea what kind of speech I would have made.

I slipped the robe over my head, adjusted the collar and looked into my little hand mirror. Nothing was out of place. One of the girls helped me adjust my cap. The tassels dangled next to my eye like soft strands of hair. Butterflies danced in my stomach, and I felt, finally, as if my life were moving forward.

We stepped back as the orchestra marched past. The outside door opened and banged a final time. Johnny came sliding beside me. He put his hands on my shoulder. "Think they'll let a 'C' in the 'B' row?"

"Not likely," I said. "We're alphabetical."

He grinned, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. His eyes hadn't smiled since prom night.

"Craig talk to you about Rennie's later?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Craig hasn't talked to me much."

"I guess we're doing something."

"He'd have told me if he wanted me, Carren."

I touched his face, brushed the tassel aside. "I want you there."

The words had more longing in them than I would have liked. Johnny heard it and trapped my hand between his cheek and shoulder. "We fucked up, Carren," he said.

I shook my head. This night was my beginning. I didn't want to hear about past mistakes. "We're doing fine."

The line started moving. Miss Holmes, the phys ed instructor in charge of the procession, clapped her hands together. "Everyone in their places."

The butterflies in my stomach were doing a tap dance. High school was ending. College, adulthood would take its place. I was ready. I had been ready a long time ago. Maybe that was why I took part in the biochemistry experiment. I saw it as a chance to grow up quicker, to make choices faster, to have opportunities that I wouldn't have had otherwise. My SAT scores were high and I knew that I would get into

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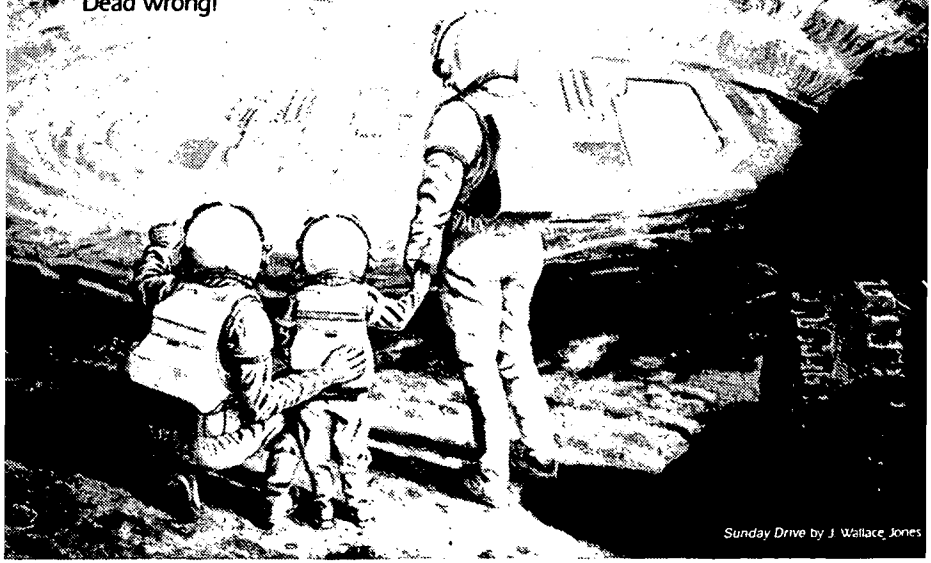

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a good school, but there seemed to have been more to it, other gifts that intelligence would give me—like the freedom to be myself. Sometimes I understood Craig's resentment of Johnny. I had wanted the experiment to work more than I ever admitted.

The inside of the gym was stifling. The heat from the day had accumulated in the roof and even the fans that were located around the building hadn't helped. The orchestra was playing "Pomp and Circumstance" as we filed in—all five hundred of us. Parents and guests peered down from the balcony, as did the juniors who were acting as ushers, wondering what it would be like to be standing on the shiny wooden floor, waiting to move their tassels to the other side of their caps. Up on the podium, Mr. Bellen stood with Danny West and a few of the teachers. The room smelled of sweat, old tennis shoes, and wood, and a sudden sadness pierced me. This was the last time I would stand on this floor as a student. My rights to Senior High ended here, my reign as a graduating senior—the top of the totem pole—was over. I was facing a future without the friends I had attended school with for the past twelve years, a place where the hierarchies were new and uncertain, where I would have to make choices that were not pre-planned. I sat down on the cold metal folding chair, listened to the music I had played several hundred times, and waited.

I waited during all the speeches, and during my father's smiles, through several dozen more bars of "Pomp and Circumstance." As my row moved through the auditorium, through that oppressive heat and fake ceremony, I still waited. My heels echoed in the wood as I crossed the stage. Mr. Bellen winked as he shook my hand and gave me the plastic case holding my diploma. I stopped, moved the tassel to the other side of my hat, and felt a surge of disappointment. Nothing had changed. Graduation was as much of a cheat as drinking that potion. A slight burning, a momentary sensation, but nothing truly different.

I climbed off the stage and went back to my seat, watching as my friends crossed the stage one by one. After a few more bars of "Pomp and Circumstance," the entire affair was over. Graduation from high school—something I had worked toward since the day I entered kindergarten—and the ceremony itself had only taken an hour and a half.

My father took me home. He hugged me, told me how proud he was of me, and exclaimed over the diploma more than I ever would. Then I changed clothes, took the Astre, and drove to Rennie's.

Lights were blazing all over the house. The Studebaker was gone—Rennie's folks were always good about leaving us alone—and the front door stood open. My heart was pounding.

I had left my heels on and a touch of make-up to go with my jeans and blouse. My clothes were perfect for Trevor's—everyone there would be

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dressed as stylishly casual as possible—but they felt very wrong for what was facing me inside that house.

As I walked up the cobble brick sidewalk, voices reached me. Strident voices.

" . . . cheated us. That's why I didn't want you here." Craig.

"Carren invited me," Johnny said.

"I don't see Carren anywhere."

I hurried. My heel caught on the step and I had to yank free.

"You mixed the stuff. What, did you give yourself the real batch and not give any of us anything?"

"Craig, slow down." Dale, with panic in his voice.

"You cheated us, didn't you? Didn't you?" The slap of flesh meeting flesh made me run. I reached the door and peered in. Johnny was leaning on the couch, Craig pummeling at his face, with Rennie and Dale trying to pull them apart. Johnny was doing nothing to defend himself. He just watched, as if he knew that something—or someone—would save him.

Craig had an insane look, spittle rising from the side of his mouth as he hit Johnny and hit him again. Blood splattered across the clean living room, and Rennie was making little gasping sounds with each blow. He and Dale couldn't hold Craig off, and I was no stronger. I pulled off both heels, gripped one shoe like a weapon and walked into the living room.

"Stop, Craig."

He didn't hear me at first. He was so absorbed in his mutilation of Johnny that my voice didn't even penetrate.

I walked over to the other side of the couch, reached across Johnny and pushed Craig with the point of my heel. "Lay off. Leave Johnny alone."

Craig looked at me, and for a moment, I thought he was going to hit me, too. Then his eyes filled with tears and he stepped back. Johnny leaned forward with a groan. I didn't even look at him. The fact that he'd failed to defend himself—twice in the last three weeks—disgusted me.

"Dale, find something to clean him up with." I moved around the couch to stand between Craig and Johnny. I was shorter than Craig and less powerful, but at that moment, I felt eight feet tall. "Don't you ever pick on him again. That experiment was simply that, an experiment. Nothing else. Nothing special. It backfired and we could have all been hurt. You hate him for something he can't control, and I want you to stop it. Find someone else to hate, but leave him alone. Johnny never meant to hurt you or to cheat any of us. We all made the same mistake together, you got that? *Together,* as in all for one and one for all." I put my shoes back on. My hands were shaking. "It doesn't really mean anything."

"It does too," Rennie said. "We're a team—"

"We were a team." I glanced at Craig. "But we're not any more."

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Dale was wiping Johnny's face. The blood was clearing, showing the bruises and his split lip. I put my arm around Johnny and helped him stand. "I'm taking him home."

"Go to Trevor's," Johnny said. He could barely move his lips.

"I'm not going to Trevor's. I'm taking you home."

We started toward the door. Dale followed us. "Carren," he said.

I turned. My gaze must have frosted him for he took a step back.

"Take care of him, okay?"

"Johnny should be able to take care of himself," I snapped, and helped him out the door.

The outdoor air seemed to have gotten colder. I opened the passenger side of the Astre, helped Johnny inside, then crawled in on my side. As I started the car, he whispered, "Don't go, Carren."

"We're leaving." I flicked on the headlights and gunned the engine. Then I peeled away from the curb.

"No," he said, struggling to sit up. "I mean, don't leave us. We need you."

I hadn't realized that I was thinking of leaving until that moment. What did Superior hold for me? A father who was too busy to care much, friends who were not friends, and a school that was no longer mine. I felt old, and squeezed, and very alone.

"I make my own choices;" I said.

And Johnny said nothing the rest of the way home.

August 1988

"We were like the perfect person," Dale said, bringing me to myself. "You were in the forefront, with me and Johnny as advisors and the passive/aggressive sides separated out. We were just so young . . . "

The perfect organization. For the first time in that house, I felt the need to sit down. I made my way over to the couch and sank in its folds. The cushions molded to a body different than my own. Johnny watched me from the couch's side.

Every politician dreamed of such an organization. A smart person in the lead, with even smarter ones behind him, a person who could foretell the future—with at least minor accuracy—and others to handle the ruly and the unruly. Reagan had such an organization. So did Roosevelt. And so did Hitler.

I shivered and looked at the men surrounding me. Craig was doing god knew what. Rennie had just married. Dale had a good job, and Johnny was drifting, knowing that this moment would come.

I smiled at him. "Quite a few rainbows in front of me, aren't there?"

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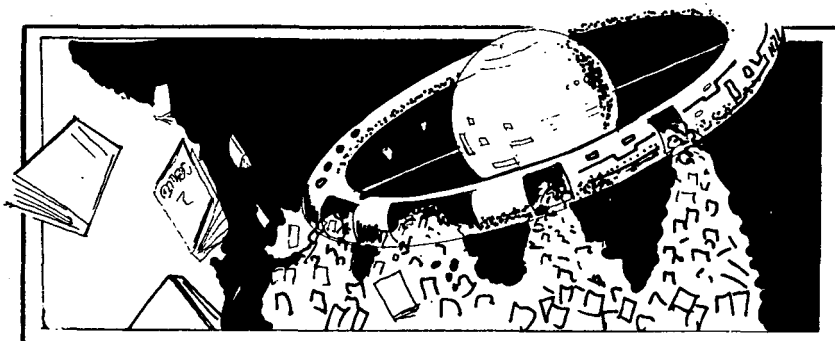

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He smiled back and didn't say anything.

"Quite a few in front of all of us," Dale said. The look on his face was intense. He had been waiting for this moment, too, and had, from his expression, thought it would never arrive.

"And as usual," Craig said, "the decision is Carren's."

His bitterness startled me, and I remembered seeing Johnny's blood spatter this room, seeing Johnny wait for me—as he was waiting for me now—as they all were waiting for me—to make their decision for them.

It would be so easy for everyone.

Except me.

Craig was clenching and unclenching his fists. He had said that he was beginning to deal with the anger problem. Dale was smart and had a good job. Rennie finally had his sleeping under control. And Johnny, Johnny seemed to have come to terms with the fact that he would never be someone in our old definition of the phrase, and he had become an interesting person in his own right.

If I stayed, I would change all of that, become responsible for them again, and use them, in some ways, for my own gain. In turn, they would continue to wait for me, wait for my decisions, wait, like Johnny did as Craig pummeled him on the night of our graduation. They would make no choices on their own, do no real growing on their own. It seemed that they might actually be better people without me, just as I would be a better person without them.

"I'm sorry," I said. I had made the correct decision a long time ago. And had been running away from it ever since. It was time I faced the choice I had made. No matter how out of control my life seemed, I had to know, like the driver of that truck careening down the Duluth hills so many years ago, that I had made my own future. Alone. "I'm sorry, Dale."

He nodded, hiding those intelligent eyes as he dipped his head. Rennie exhaled behind me, and Craig turned back toward the fire. Only Johnny didn't move. The smile remained, small and mysterious, the smile my father used to have when he was proud of me.

I finished my Scotch, and glanced at the Risk game. I had had enough of games. "God, I need a cigarette. Anyone have one?"

Craig patted his breast pocket and pulled out a pack and a lighter. I took a cigarette and was about to light the first smoke I would have in five years when Rennie said, "You'll have to do it outside."

His chubby face held an apologetic expression, but I didn't mind. Outside sounded good. Outside sounded better than good. Outside sounded wonderful. I got up and went out onto the front steps. My whole body was trembling, and the restless feeling had returned. I would see the

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attorney in the morning, tell him to sell the house. Superior held nothing for me any more, except memories.

It was time, then, to return to Milwaukee and stop hiding. To do the favors, date some men, prance before the television cameras. The four musketeers had actually come to terms with their problems. It was time that plus one, be she Constance or another D'Artagnan, did too.

I heard a slight rustle behind me and then Johnny sat down. "You haven't lit up."

I stared at the cigarette I had been twisting in my hand. "I gave up a few years ago."

He took the lighter from me and stuck it in his pocket. "I hate kissing a woman who tastes like nicotine." He leaned over and brushed his lips against mine. "That's for old times," he murmured. Then he took my face in his right hand and kissed me slowly, exploring my whole mouth. "And that's for new."

I smiled. He put his arms around me, and I leaned on him, enjoying the sensation of relaxing with another person, no promises, no magic potions, no silly dreams. I had been wrong all those years ago. Best friends could hold each other without harming the friendship.

"You staying?" he asked.

"You have to ask?" I replied. Even if his ESP wasn't working, my decision to leave again had to be obvious.

"No." He sighed softly, sadly, and tightened his grip on me. And for those brief moments, under the moonlit northern sky, I felt as if I had come home. ●

MARIA MITCHELL OBSERVES THE PERSEID SHOWER

Tonight I forego magnification
and accept the heavens in bold display
standing toward Dionis and a foaming shore
to catch the slow stream of meteors
some distant maiden
combing her hair down
strand by strand

—Robert Frazier

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ZELLE'S THURSDAY

by Tanith Lee

After too long an absence, Tanith Lee returns to *IAsfm* with a bittersweet depiction of an ordinary day with Zelle. A collection of Ms. Lee's "Flat Earth" tales, *Night Sorceries,* was published last year by DAW Books; her latest novel, *A Heroine of the Night,* is just out from DAW.

art: Janet Aulisio

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Thursday was rather difficult. In the morning the children attacked me again, which was a pity, they'd been quite reasonable since that incident in the spring.

The trouble began because of the myrmecophaga, which had climbed up into one of the giant walnut trees on the west lawn. In the wild state, this species doesn't climb, but genetic habilitation sometimes causes subaspects, often feline, to establish themselves. Having climbed up into or on to or out of various objects, the myrmecophaga then tends to jump. This, in a heavily-furred, long-clawed animal weighing over two hundred and ten pounds, cannot always be ignored.

I ran down across the lawn to the tree.

Angelo was still standing under it when I arrived.

"Angelo," I said, "please stand away."

"Why," asked Angelo, "are you calling me 'Angelo'? It's Mr. Vald-Conway to you."

"Of course, if you prefer. Please do stand away, Mr. Vald-Conway."

Angelo, who is currently twelve years and three months old, will one day be handsome, but the day has not yet come. He gazed up into the tree and casually said, "Oh, look, Higgins is up there."

"Yes, Mr. Vald-Conway. That's why I'm suggesting you should stand away."

At that moment Higgins (the myrmecophaga) lurched forward on his powerful furry wrists. Two branches broke, and showered us with green walnuts. I was poised to pull Angelo from danger, but presently the spasms of movement ceased. Angelo said admiringly, "What a mess you're making, Higgins."

(Angelo is at the age of taking pleasure in the damaging of his father's property. In the case of property of his mother's, he is more ambivalent.) Angelo stared up at the hugely draped coal-black shape of Higgins.

"Isn't he a beauty."

"Yes," I agreed, "Mr. Vald-Conway. Higgins is a fine example of a myrmecophaga."

"You can stop calling me *Mr. Vald-Conway*. That's what you call my father. And why do you call Higgins *that*? He's an ant-eater."

"I shall try to remember."

"Are you smarting me?" Angelo asked suspiciously. He is extremely sensitive. "You just watch that."

"I meant, Angelo—(?)—that I'll try to remember you'd rather I referred to your pet by the common term."

"Well. . . . Just watch it anyhow."

Ursula, Mister and Madam's daughter, had meanwhile appeared on the lawn. She is two years and five months older than Angelo, a tall slender girl, like her brother having the black hair and black eyes of

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Madam Conway. She had been on the games court and had a racket in her hand.

"There's Higgins in the tree," said Ursula, "and there's Jelly underneath."

"Don't call me Jelly," snarled Angelo.

"And the Thing," added Ursula. She sank down under the combined shade of the walnut tree and Higgins. "Thing, go up and get me some iced lemonade. I'm dry as an old desert."

Precisely then, Higgins jumped. It was an especially spectacular launch, and may have been occasioned by a flea, as he was due for a vacuuming.

I saw at once that the climax of his trajectory would be Ursula. She too seemed to have deduced this, for she started a frantic roll to avoid him. I dashed forward, swept her up and deposited her on the grass three meters away. Higgins landed, and for a moment looked stunned and partly squashed. Then he glanced about at us in slight surprise, shook himself back into shape, and began to groom twigs and walnuts from his fur.

Angelo ran forward and clasped Higgins, who began idly to groom him also, then lost interest having refound his own tail, always a time of inspiration.

"You tried to upset him—" Angelo cried at me, nearly tearful. "You wanted him to fall hard and get hurt."

"If you think that falling on your sister would have made for a softer landing, I doubt it."

Ursula screamed, "What do you mean, I'm bony or something? You rotten *Thing*." She slapped me in the face. Though I saw the blow coming, it obviously couldn't harm me, and I judged, perhaps wrongly, she would be relieved by delivering it.

"I meant," I said, "that the animal might have crushed your ribs. Only something bone-*less* could act as a break-fall for such a large—"

"And *you* nearly dislocated my pelvis, dragging me like that. You pig! I could have got out of the way—"

"Not quickly en—"

"You just wanted to bruise me. *Look!* You're horrible. You're OB-SCENE—"

And Ursula flew at me and began striking me with her racket, which all this while she had held on to.

Angelo with a wail tore over and joined in enthusiastically.

As they punched and whacked and kicked, Higgins curled up in a ball, wrapped his groomed plume of a tail around himself, and contentedly fell asleep.

* * *

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I was vacuuming Higgins that afternoon when Mr. de Vald came to me in deep distress.

"My God, Zelle. I don't know what to say."

"I'm still under guarantee, Mr. de Vald. There won't be any charge. Most of the damage was external and took only half an hour to put right. The internal damage is being repaired even now, as I work."

"Yes, Zelle. But it's not that. It's the horror of it, Zelle."

"Which horror, Mr. de Vald?"

"That they could do—that such a thing—children of *mine*."

"It's not entirely uncommon, Mr. de Vald, in the first year or so."

I had by now switched off the vacuum, and Higgins was recovering from the swoon of ecstasy into which he falls when once the vacuum catches up with him, since at first he always runs away from it. While I had watched them going round and round the pavilion on the east lawn, I removed the last of the debrasion mask from my cheek. Actually, the cosmetic renewal of my face, arms, and shoulders had taken longer than I'd said, for I'd tried to relieve Mr. de Vald's mind.

"You see, Zelle," said Patrice de Vald, sitting down beside me on the steps of the pavilion, "it's the trend to violence I abhor."

"Please don't worry, Mr. de Vald, that anything they do to me they might ever be inclined to do to a fellow human. It's quite a different syndrome."

"Syndrome. Christ, my kids are part of a syndrome."

He put his blond head in his lean hands.

(Higgins, annoyed at the vacuum-cleaner's sudden lack of attention, stuffed his long tube of black velvet face into the machine's similar slender black tube. It has occurred to me before that he thinks certain household appliances to be [failed, bald] myrmecophagae.)

"You see, Zelle. I want you to be happy here."

It's useless to explain that this terminology, or outlook, can't apply to me.

"Mr. de Vald, I'm perfectly happy. And in time, Angelo and Ursula will come to accept me, I'm sure."

"Well, Zelle, I just want you to know, the house never functioned so—elegantly. And my partner, Inita—she's sometimes reticent about these things. . . . But she thinks that, too. It's so much better to have you in charge than a—just some faceless—" he broke off. He blushed. Trying to be tactful, he always came around to this point, exaggerating what he meant to avoid.

Higgins withdrew his face from the face of the vacuum-cleaner.

"Here, boy," said Mr. de Vald jollily.

Higgins gave him a look from his onyx eyes, and shambled off across the lawn towards the lake. In the wild, myrmecophagae have limited

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sight and hearing, but the habilitation reorganizes such functions. Higgins has twenty-twenty vision and can detect one synthetic ant falling into his platter at a distance of two hundred meters.

"Guess he didn't hear me," said Mr. de Vald. He looked at me, his own eyes anxious and wide. "All I can do about the brats is apologize. They've been punished. I've vetoed those light concerts in town they're both so keen to visit." It wasn't up to me to advise him, unless he asked for advice. But now he added meekly, "Do you think?"

"Mr. de Vald, as the property of yourself and your wife, of course you could say that any damage to me must be punishable. On the other hand, half the problem arises because your children can't quite accept, as yet, that I'm no different than—say—that vacuum-cleaner."

"Oh, Zelle."

"Technically," I said, "there's nothing to choose, except that I am entirely self-programming, autonomous, and, therefore, ultra efficient. That I look as I do is supposed to make me more compatible."

"Oh and, Zelle, it does. Why, our house parties— And the number of people who've said to me, who's that pretty new maid, how on earth can you afford a human servant, and so cute—just as though you were—I mean that they thought you were—weren't—" he broke off, red now to the ears. "You think I shouldn't punish Ursula and Angelo. Just explain it over to them. That you're . . . not—"

"That I'm just a machine, Mr. de Vald. That I'm not a threat. That if they would try to think of me more on the lines of an aesthetic, multipurpose appliance, this fear they have of me would eventually fade."

"I guess you're right, Zelle."

My smiling circuit activated.

He dreamily patted my no-longer-broken shoulder and went slowly away across the lawn after Higgins, who never quite allowed him to catch up.

By the drinks hour, every bit of me was repaired, outside and in. I was on the terrace, supervising the trolleys and mixers, and the ice-maker. Mr. de Vald had driven over to the airport, and there was some tension, as Madam Conway, who had been away on her working schedule, was returning unexpectedly.

The children had reappeared on the east lawn, cooler at this time of day, and were sitting near the pavilion looking very subdued. Sometimes I detected—my hearing is as fine as Higgins'—Ursula's voice: "Mother said she'd bring me the new body cosmetic. She *did*. But will she remember? I wonder how many paintings she sold? If she got het up, she'll have forgotten the body cosmetic. I don't want to look like an old immature frump all the time." Angelo, who was being restrained, only

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spoke occasionally, in monosyllables, as for example "Red light. Looking forward. *Knows* I was." Higgins had fallen in the lake during the afternoon, and was being automatically dried in the boating-shed.

Presently the car appeared in the ravine, rounded the elms, and curved noiselessly up on to the auto-drive. Here it began to deposit Madam Conway's thirty-five pieces of luggage in the service lift.

Inita Conway came walking gracefully over the lawn with Mr. de Vald, raising one hand languidly at her children. Ursula evinced excitement and rushed towards her mother. Angelo rose in a sort of accommodating slouch designed to disguise concentrated emotion.

Inita Conway wore golden sandals, and her black hair in the fashionable spike known as the *unicorn*. Ursula exclaimed over and examined this with careful admiration. " 'lo, mumma. Did you sell a lot of paintings? Why are you home so soon? I'm glad you're home so soon. Did you bring my body cosmetic?"

"Yes, Ursula, I brought your body cosmetic. Your tidy's carried it up to your room."

"Can-I-go-and—"

"Yes, Ursula."

Ursula bolted.

Angelo approached his mother and said, "Hi. Dad's vetoed the concerts."

"So I have heard. And I heard why."

Angelo lounged by the drinks table, which the organizer was now setting out. He kept putting his hands down where the organizer was trying to lay tumblers, so that it had to select somewhere else.

"You're home early, motherrr," slurred Angelo. "Whysat?"

"To catch your father out," said Madam Conway. She looked at me and said, "Zelle, I want you to come up to my suite after drinks. I have three original Sarba shirts and some things for Ursula. They need to be sorted before dinner."

Then turning to Patrice de Vald she snatched him into a passionate embrace that embarrassed Angelo and apparently embarrassed also Mr. de Vald. "Darling. Have you *missed* me?"

"I always—"

"Yes, but in the past, you were *lonely*."

Mr. de Vald looked terribly nervous. There was no reason that I knew why he should be, but sometimes the communications between these two partners are so complex, and have so many permutations, that I can't follow them. Their relationship seems to be a little like chess, but without the rules.

There was a dim uproar from the boating-shed.

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Madam Conway disengaged herself from Mr. de Vald's uneasy arms. "I suppose that's that bloody ant-eater up to something."

She downed her drink, a triple gin-reine, and took a triple gin-colada. She beckoned me towards the house.

As we went along the terrace, she called back, "Oh, Patrice. Someone's coming to dinner. A young designer I met."

Having killed the automatic drier, Higgins burst from the shed and pounced along the lawn, his fringed coat now fluffed and shaking like a well-made soufflé.

"Bloody animal," said Madam Conway. "I'd have the damn thing put down if it weren't for the Animal Rights regulations."

"Angelo would be distressed," I said. "He's very fond of his pet."

"Yes, we're very fond of our pets, Zelle. By the way, I didn't think you offered advice unless asked."

"I was not, Madam Conway, offering advice."

"You mean it was just a casual human comment?"

"An observation, Madam Conway."

"What else have you observed, Zelle?"

"In what area, Madam Conway?"

"Well, I realize you have to study us all minutely. In order to fulfil our wildest dreams correctly."

The house door opened and we stepped on the moving stair. (As we rose past the windows, I noticed Higgins was in the lake again.)

"For example," said Madam Conway, as we entered the elevator for her suite, "what have you found out about Patrice's wildest dreams? Anything I ought to know?"

"I'm sorry, Madam Conway. I don't understand."

"I'll bet."

We entered the suite. It is white at the moment, with touches of purple, blue, and gold. Inita Conway, with her slender coffee body and two meters of inky hair, dominated every room, even the bathroom, which was done in dragons.

"You see, Zelle, dear," said Inita Conway, "I happen to know what goes on in a house once your sort of humanoid robot is installed."

Her luggage had arrived, and I saw that the suite tidy had already begun to unpack and service the Sarba shirts. I had not therefore really been summoned for this task.

Instead it seemed I was being attacked again. And that this was rather more serious than the assault instigated by the children.

"Well," said Madam Conway. "Go on, deny it."

"What do you wish me to deny, Madam Conway?"

"That you're taking my partner to bed."

"Exactly, Madam Conway, I deny it."

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She smiled. Throwing off her clothes she marched into the shower. A dragon hissed foam upon her. She stood in the foam, a beautiful icon of flesh, and snapped, "Don't tell me you can't lie. I know you things can lie perfectly damn well. And *don't* tell me you're frigid. I know every one of you comes with sex built *in*—"

"Yes, Madam Conway, it's true that my model functions to orgasm. But this is only—"

"I can just *imagine*," she screamed, turning on another dragon, "what erotic pleasures have been rocking the house to its core. If the bloody automatic hadn't picked up my return flight number, I'd have got here when you weren't expecting me. Caught the two of you writhing with arched backs among the blasted Sarba sheets I bought that *bastard* last trip—" A third dragon rendered her unintelligible if not inaudible. She switched off all three suddenly, and coming out before the drier could take the jewels of water from her skin, she confronted me with one hand raised like a panther's paw. "You—you *trollop*. I know. Couldn't help it. He made you. Oh, I've heard *all* about it. Men get crazy to try you. The perfect woman. HAH!"

"I have to warn you," I said, "Madam Conway, that I've already had to facilitate quite extensive repairs to myself today, and although the guarantee *may* cover further wilful damage during the same twenty-four hour unit, I'm not certain of that. If you wish, I can tap into the main bank and find out."

"Oh go to hell you moronic plastic whore."

"Do you mean you'd prefer me to leave your suite?"

"Yes. My God. You and that ant-eater. I'd put the pair of you—"

Although she told me, I did not grasp the syntax.

The dinner guest, Madam's designer, arrived late, in the middle of the argument over Ursula's body cosmetic. Mr. de Vald insisted that his daughter had used too much of the cosmetic and looked like a fifty-year old. (In fact, Ursula looked about nineteen.) Madam Conway laughed bitterly and said that a woman needed every help she could get with all the competition around. Angelo was sulking because his mother hadn't brought him anything back from her trip; he had earlier requested her not to, on the grounds that being given presents was for girls and babies.

The fourth argument over the cosmetic was in fact a second installment of the second argument that had taken place since the start of the meal. The first and third arguments, though having differing pivots, actually concerned Inita Conway's guest, who had seemed to fail to call.

I was stirring the dessert (a flambeau, which Mr. de Vald likes me to see to by hand), when the guest after all was shown out on to the terrace. An utter silence resulted. Angelo glared, and Ursula gaped. Mr. de Vald

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spilled his wine and when the tidy came forward pushed it roughly away. Madam Conway did not look up. She merely smiled into her uneaten salad.

"Oh, Jack. I thought you'd never get here. Just in time to rescue us all from the familial slog."

Jack Tchekov was a most beautiful young man, who is sometimes featured in moving-picture zines. He has been described as having a dancer's body, a wrestler's shoulders, a pianist's hands, the legs of a marathon runner, the face of a young god, and the hair of a Renaissance prince. None of these descriptions seemed, to the off-hand observer, to be inaccurate.

As the guest seated himself (by Madam Conway, glittering his eyes like those of a cabalistic demon [or it may have been that the analogy of a falling angel was more to the point]), some stilted conversation began, introductions and so on. I continued to whip the flambeau and, at the crucial moment, pour it into the smoking spice-pan.

"My God, that smells wonderful, I was in time for the climax of the feast," said Jack Tchekov in the voice of a Shakespearian actor.

"Yes, timing is important, with that dish. But Zelle's timing, so I gather, is always flawless," said Madam Conway.

When the flambeau was fumed, the service took over. Mr. Tchekov was looking only at me.

"And this *is* the formidable Zelle."

"That is she," said Madam Conway.

"May I—" said Mr. Tchekov, and hestitated dramatically. "Might I go over and touch her?"

"For Christsakes," growled Patrice de Vald. "What do you think you're doing?"

But Mr. Tchekov had already come up to me with his walk like a tiger, and taken my hand with the firm gentleness always mooted as being that of the probable connoisseur. "No," he said, looking into my eyes with the power of ray-guns, "I don't believe it. You're just a girl, aren't you?"

"I'm a robotic humanoid, Mr. Tchekov, issue number z.e.l. one zero nine nine six."

"Take your hands off," shouted Mr. de Vald, coming up behind Mr. Tchekov angrily. "You may have been all over Inita, but you'll show some respect to my—to Zelle."

"Over Inita?" cried Mr. Tchekov. "Save me from the universal jealousy of the inadequate partner."

"Come on then," said Patrice de Vald.

"Come *on?*"

"You want to make something of it?"

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"Don't be a Martian," said Mr. Tchekov.

"I said, make something!"

"Dad—" honked Angelo.

"Oh! Oh!" screamed Ursula, hoping Jack Tchekov would turn to see why, but he didn't.

"Oh go on, fight over her," said Inita. "I brought Jack," she added, "so that he could try Zelle out. You know, darling, the one thing she can do that you, of *course,* haven't *any* interest in."

Patrice de Vald looked at me in an agony.

"Zelle—I'll throw him straight out."

"Shit," said Ursula.

"Don't use that *word,*" said Inita. "My God, haven't I, for the past fifteen years trained myself never to use words like that in front of her and then she goes and does it when we have people in."

Jack Tchekov leaned close to me.

"Let's walk by the lake, Zelle. Away from all this domestic unbliss."

Patrice de Vald took hold of Jack Tchekov's shoulder and Jack Tchekov gave a little shrug and Mr. de Vald fell among the flambeau dishes.

Inita screamed now.

"Take her away! Both of you! Get on with it—get out of my sight."

"She's given you her most gracious permission," said Jack Tchekov. "Will you, now?"

I could see that Mr. de Vald was only winded, although several of the plates, which are antiques, had smashed. I am not, of course, a defense model, and so can do very little in this sort of situation. I am not able, for example, to separate human combatants. There was no need to carry Mr. de Vald to the house or administer first aid.

Angelo was frightened and Ursula was crying openly.

I could only allow the insistent guest to steer me away along the lawn.

In the starlight by the lake, the fireflies, which, like the diurnal bees and butterflies, are permitted to get inside the insect sensors, hovered about the bushes. Jack Tchekov drew me into his arms and kissed me tenderly, amorously.

"No, you *are* a girl. Some bionics maybe. But this flesh, this skin—your hair and eyes—and this wonderful smell—what perfume is it you're wearing, Zelle?" (In fact it was not any perfume of mine, but Higgins. Having rolled in some honeysuckle he was now prowling the lakeside.) "And you can't tell me you don't feel something when I touch you, like this. . . ?"

Of course, I felt nothing at all, but my affection-display mechanism activated on cue. It had had no chance to do so in any of its modes, until

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now. I can report that it's most efficient. My arms coiled about Mr. Tchekov.

We sank beneath a giant pine. Soon after, my orgasm mechanism was activated. My body responded, although naturally, it felt nothing. (The stimuli operate on evidence gleaned from the partner, therefore at the ideal instant.) Mr. Tchekov was also as apparently ignorant about this as about the affection response, and might have been greatly satisfied. Unfortunately, Higgins chose that moment to surface from the lake, into which he had again insinuated himself. He is evidently due to become a strong swimmer. His slender nose, a tube of jet on softer darkness, lifted some eleven meters from shore. He blew a crystalline water-spout that seemed to incorporate the stars.

"Go-od-wh-at *is it?*" ejaculated Mr. Tchekov.

As my response subsided, the heart mechanic slowed and I was able to breath more normally, I replied with the reassurance, "Only the myrmecoph—the ant-eater."

"Dangerous?" Jack Tchekov did not seem to relish this combat as he had the fracas at the table of his host. "Awfully damn large."

"They're insectivorous," I said.

Intent on some quest known only to himself, Higgins swam powerfully and liquidly away, and left us.

"Inita says she plans to shoot that thing and say it committed suicide." Mr. Tchekov laughed, somewhat raggedly, tidying his clothes. My laugh mechanism was activated. I was more spontaneous than he. "Frankly, to the point," said Mr. Tchekov, standing up with a slight scowl that could have been a Byronic brooding post-coital depression, or only a cramp, "I can tell Inita your seal was completely intact. I was the first. Can't imagine why it should matter to her, that spineless Aztec of a partner she's got. But there you are. I'd better not mention to Pat what a little nymphomaniac *he's* got, under his roof.

All devices come properly sealed to new owners. Mr. Tchekov is evidently unaware too that such seals can be indefinitely renewed.

Also Inita Conway.

"I wronged you, Zelle."

"Not at all, Madam."

"And I wronged *Patrice.*"

All over the house the lights are on, and it is now four hours into Friday morning. Ursula is playing music and crying because she has fallen in love with Jack Tchekov who never even looked at her, and is unlikely to return. Angelo is crying because he has seen his father knocked down and his mother hasn't brought him a present. Mr. de Vald

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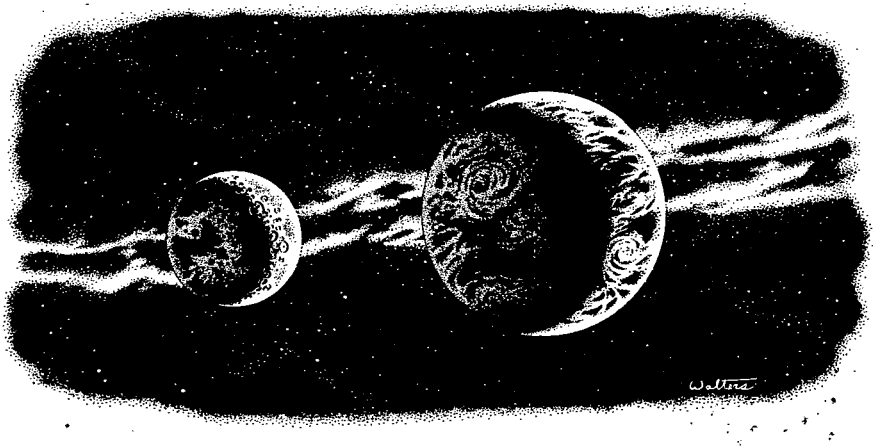
and Madam Conway are crying and shouting at each other, but there is nothing unusual in that, nor in the words they employ, which refer to painting, separation, emotional vampirism, and sex. A note addressed to me and delivered by the service informs me in contrite tones that Mr. de Vald is aware of my rape, and the dreadful distress I must be suffering. He begs me to be honest with him, in the morning—presumably *later* in the morning—and not to blame Inita Conway, although she has behaved "unforgivably." I must marshal sympathetic explanations for Mr. de Vald, to help him see that I am not harmed, and also to prevent his making the mistake of which so far he has been innocent. But probably, as with my last employer, he will not be able to resist.

Then, seal or no seal, he will confess all to his partner. Just as my last employer did. Repairing the entire cranial region after the blast of a sports rifle at close range is a job only the central bank can attempt. A fine is levied from the offending owner. Madam's paintings are not selling as well as they did, and I think both she and Mr. de Vald would find payment for hasty actions inconvenient.

But, too, Madam may relent in her pursuit of vengeance. Earlier, she pursued Higgins to his ant-hill-shaped platter and poured out for him too many synthetic ants, stroking his wet fur and sobbing that he was the only clean decent thing in the house. Higgins ate all the food, and was consequently extensively ill on an antique carpet.

Altogether, Thursday was not a good day, and Friday doesn't seem set to be much better. ●



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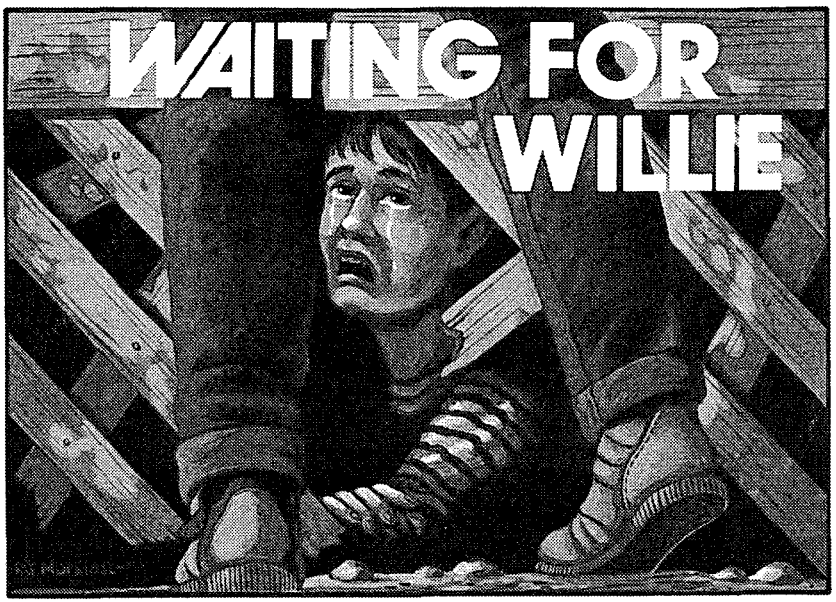
Fear has been known to strike the heart of the average twelve-year-old boy who has to face the girl of his dreams. That terror takes on an added dimension in an alternate world where everyone is . . .



by Avram Davidson

art: Pat Morrissey

When she returned her mother asked, "Did you catch a sight of him? Will you just give him a chance?"

"He's hiding under the porch—yes! I 'caught a sight of him!'—crying, because he didn't win a prize. I'll give him a chance, I'll wait half an hour and so I'll still give him a chance—"

Her mother murmured, "Don't be too hard on him, Dee. He's only twelve."

" 'Hard on him,' oh that's very funny. Well, what about *me? I'm* only twelve! What am I supposed to say to my *friends!* Willie! I didn't pick him out on purpose, his name just came out of the darned old bowl."

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"Well, that's the way it always *is*." Her mother found a thread to snip.

Dee stamped her foot. "Darned old prize. Boys care about that, girls don't care about *that!*" She made a face, exclaimed, *"Ohhh!"*

Her mother sighed. "—if you'd just go and *talk* to him, quietly and friendly—"

"Well, I *won't!* Stupid Willie. Sissy! Now I'll have to wait six months, and all my friends—"

Mom said, if he only knew it, Dee was the best prize. Dee said, scornfully, well, he didn't know it and at this rate he never would. "Might as well pour out that lemonade and throw away that cake." But her mother of course did neither.

In came Buddy. "All dolled up, Sis, say, you look great, say, where's your beau, what's his name, Willie?"

Dee, who'd smiled at the compliment, scowled. "Why do you boys always have to have your old contest *now?*"

Buddy seemed a little surprised. "Well, gee, that's when it's supposed to be. Where's what's his—Willie?" His fingers edged towards the iced cake but withdrew after a warning headshake from his mother.

"Hiding under the porch? Crying? Because he didn't win a prize?"

"Hey, that's dumb. Want me to talk to him?"

"Oh, Buddy," said Mom. "If you only *would.*"

But Sis called out a long defiant ascending *"Nooo!"*

Buddy was perhaps easily surprised. "But suppose he goes into the river?"

Dee ("Sis") shrugged her pretty shoulders petulantly. "Well, suppose he *does?* Then his dumb genes won't be in the pool anymore."

Her brother shrugged, said, "Okay, hey," and went out via the side door where there was no porch.

Sis continued to suffer. "Dumb old beau," she said. "Crying because he's afraid his *thing* isn't big enough. Big enough for *what? I* ought to be the judge of that, not a bunch of smelly boys! Oh just my rotten luck on my First Time to have to draw some kid blond wimp out of the bowl!"

Her mother sighed. "Yes, I *know.* I'm sorry." There was a sound from outside and a little below, scuffling, sobbing, then feet running. "There he *goes,*" said Mom. "Sure enough. Towards the river." She sighed again. "Well, you'll just have to wait the six months, then."

Dee stood up. "Might as well take these darned frills off, and—oh, Mom! You worked so hard to make them—"

"Mothers only want their children to be happy, dear. *I'm* sorry!" She put a piece of waxed paper over the cake to keep the flies off. ●

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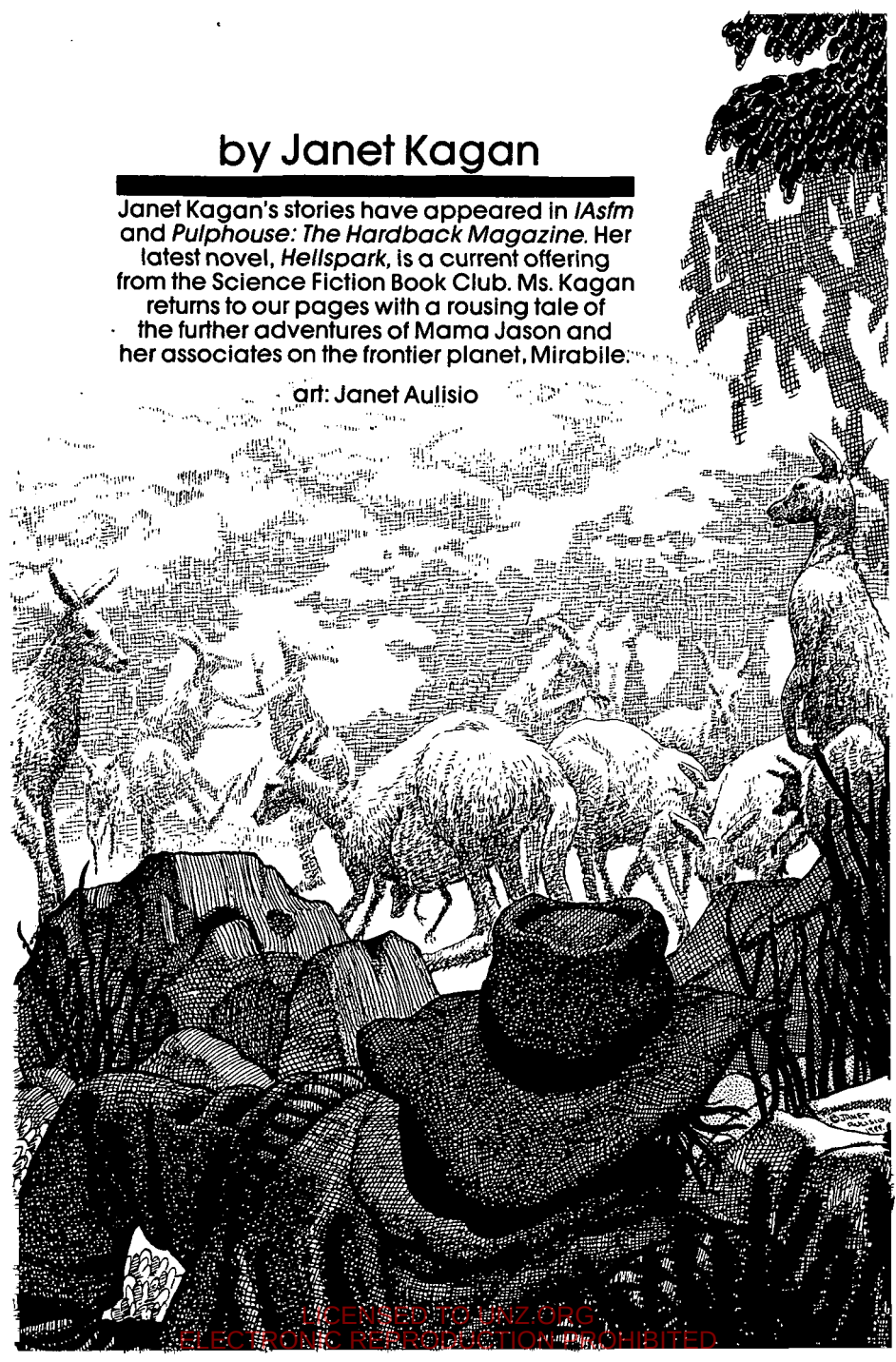
by Janet Kagan

Janet Kagan's stories have appeared in *IAsfm* and *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine*. Her latest novel, *Hellspark*, is a current offering from the Science Fiction Book Club. Ms. Kagan returns to our pages with a rousing tale of the further adventures of Mama Jason and her associates on the frontier planet, Mirabile.

art: Janet Aulisio



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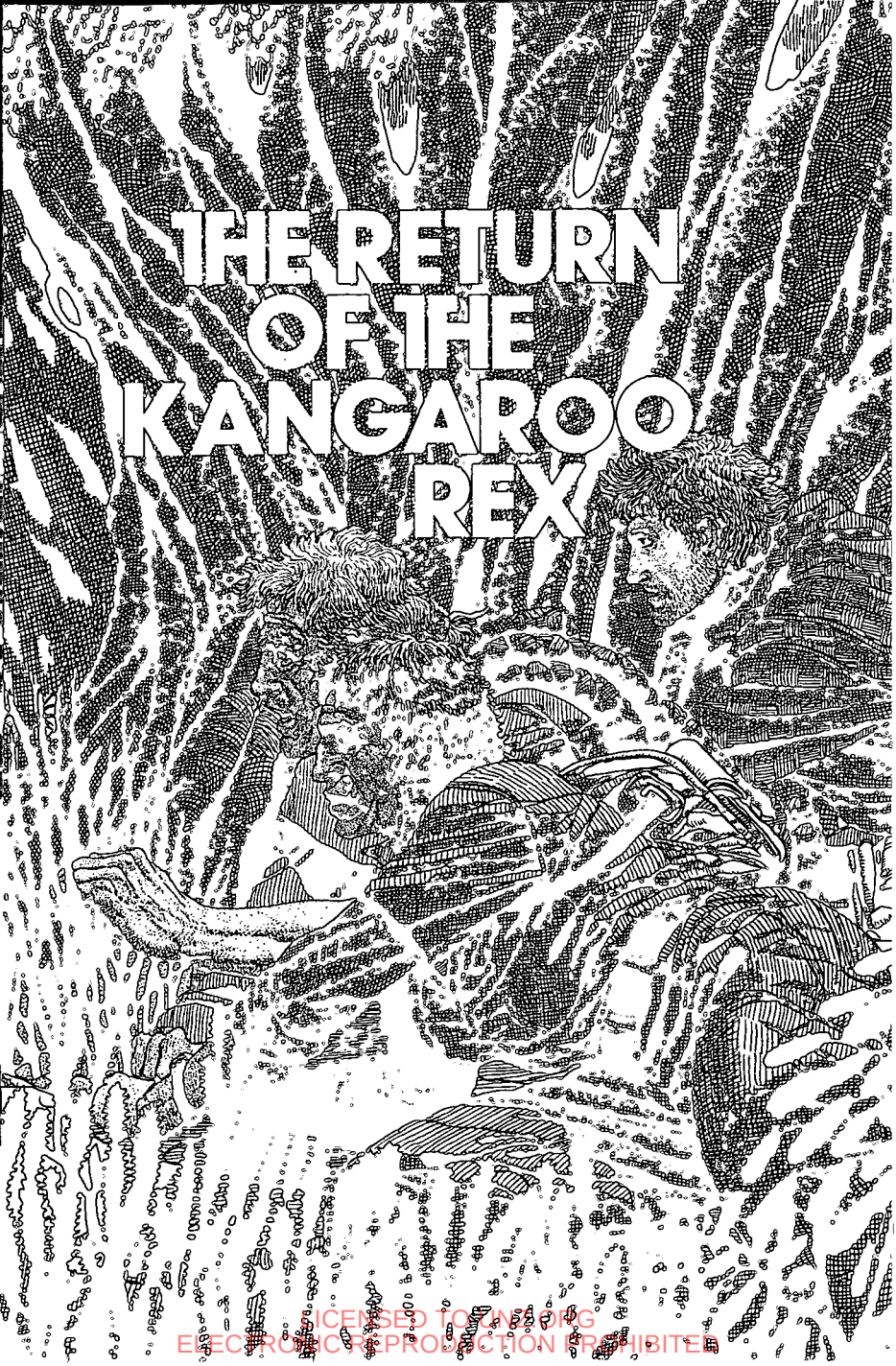

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I'd been staring at the monitor so long all the genes were beginning to look alike to me. They shouldn't have, of course—this gene-read was native Mirabilan, so it was a whole new kettle of fish.

That's an American Guild expression, but it's the right one. At a casual look, had the critter been Earth-based, we'd have classed it as fish and left it at that. The problem was that it had taken a liking to our rice crop, and, if we didn't do something quick, nobody on Mirabile'd see a chow fun noodle ever again. So I went back to staring, trying to force those genes into patterns the team and I could cope with.

Moving the rice fields didn't guarantee we'd find a place free of them. In the first place, it encysted in dry ground, meaning you never knew where it'd pop up until you flooded the area. In the second place, it could leap like a salmon from the first place *to* the second place. It had already demonstrated its ability to spread from one field to the next. Susan had measured a twelve-foot leap.

The prospect got dimmer when Chie-Hoon caught them making that same leap from dry ground. Their limit was some five or six leaps until they hit water again, but that gave them quite a range.

It was as pretty a piece of native bioengineering as I've seen, one I could appreciate even if the rice growers couldn't. Wiping 'em out wholesale was not an option on *my* list, but I knew the farmers would be thinking along those lines if we didn't come up with something by next growing season.

I don't mess with the Mirabilan ecology any more than I have to. We don't know enough about it to know what we're getting into. Even if I thought we could do it, we'd be fools to try to wipe out any native species. The Earth-authentic species we've imported have played havoc enough with the Mirabilan ecology.

I wasn't paying much attention to anything but the problem at hand, so when Susan exclaimed, "Noisy! You look *awful*," I practically jumped out of my skin and busted my elbow turning my chair.

"Noisy" is Susan's pet name for Leonov Bellmaker Denness, and he *did* look awful. His white hair looked like something had nested in it; he was bleeding—no, *had* bled profusely—across the cheek; his shirt hung in tatters from the shoulder and there were raking claw-marks along his upper arms. Mike went scrambling for the emergency kit.

The only thing that spoiled the impact of all this disaster was that Leo was grinning from ear to ear. "Now, is that any way to greet an old friend?" he said to Susan. "Especially one who's come courting?"

He turned the grin on me and it got broader and brighter. Then he made me a deep formal bow and started in: "Ann Jason Masmajean, I, Leonov Bellmaker Denness, beg you to hear my petition."

I got to my feet and bowed back, just as deeply and formally, to let

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him know I'd be glad to hear him out. He made a second bow, deeper than the first, and went on: "I have brought you a gift in symbol of my intentions . . ."

Mike had the medical kit but he stood frozen. Chances were neither he nor Susan had ever seen a ship's-formal proposal except in the old films. The novelty of it kept either from interrupting. Just as well. I was enjoying the performance: Leo has flair.

Besides, I wouldn't dream of interrupting a man in the process of cataloguing my virtues, even if some of those "virtues" would have raised eyebrows in a lot of other people. I especially liked being called "reasonably stubborn."

At last Leo got to the wrap-up. "It is my hope that you will accept my gift and consider my suit." He finished off with yet another bow.

Seeing he was done spurred Mike and Susan into action. Susan held Leo down while Mike worked him over with alcohol swabs. "No respect for ritual," Leo complained, "Back 'em off, Annie, can't you? I'm not senile yet! I *did* clean the wounds."

Leo had spent years as a scout, so I didn't doubt his good sense. He'd hardly have lived to the ripe old age he had if he hadn't been cautious about infection in the bush.

To the two of them, he protested, "The lady hasn't answered yet."

"Back off," I told the kids.

They didn't until I advanced on them. Mike took two steps away from Leo, put his hands behind his back, and said to Susan, "*Now* he's going to get it." Susan nodded.

Leo just kept grinning, so I gave him a huge hug hello to make sure nothing was broken. The rest of him looked just fine, so I stepped back and bowed once more to meet the requirements of the ritual. "Leo Bellmaker Denness, I, Ann Jason Masmajean, am sufficiently intrigued to view your gift."

He crooked a finger and led me outside, Mike and Susan right behind. "In the back of the truck. *Don't* open that door until you've had a good look!"

So we climbed the back bumper and all crowded to the window for a good look. We didn't get one at first. Whatever it was was mad as all hell, and launched itself at the door hard enough to rattle the window and make the three of us jump back en masse. The door held.

Leo said, "It's been doing that all the way from Last Edges. Hasn't gotten through the door yet, but I'm a little worried it might hurt itself."

"It's not itself it wants to hurt," Susan said.

"You'd be pissed, too, if somebody wrestled you away from your mama and shoved you into the back of a truck headed god-knows-where," Leo said.

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The door stopped rattling. I got a foot on the back bumper and hoisted myself up for a second try. Leo's present glared at me through the window and snarled. I snarled back in the same tone.

Since it was a youngster and I was an unknown, it backed off with a hop, letting me get a good look. In overall shape, it was kangaroo, but it had the loveliest set of stripes across the hips I'd ever seen—and the jaw! Oh, the jaw! It opened that jaw to warn me to keep back, and the head split almost to the ear, to show me the sharpest set of carnivore teeth in history.

"Oh, Leo," I murmured, stepping down from my perch. "That's the nicest present anybody's ever brought me." I gave him another big hug and a thorough kiss for good measure. "Leonov Bellmaker Denness, I accept both your gift and your suit."

He beamed. "I knew I got it right."

"Oh, shit!" said Mike, from behind me. "Susan! It's a goddam kangaroo rex!" He stared at Leo in disbelief. "Are you telling me this man brought you a *kangaroo rex* as a courting present?"

Susan, in turn, looked at *Mike* in disbelief. "It's perfect, you idiot! It means Noisy knows exactly what kind of person she is, and how to please her. Don't you understand *any*thing?"

That would have devolved into a squabble—let a twenty-four-year-old and a sixteen-year-old discuss any subject and that's the usual outcome—but the kangaroo rex slammed against the door of the truck again and brought them both back to their senses.

"Leo," I said, "go on over to my house and get yourself cleaned up. We'll wrestle the thing into a cage. Then I want to hear all about it."

He nodded. "Sure. Two things first, though. Pick the right cage—I saw that thing jump a six-foot fence—then contact Moustafa Herder Kozlev or Janzen Herder Lizhi in Last Edges. I told Moustafa I'd make the official report on his Dragon's Tooth but I doubt he believes me." He examined a set of skinned knuckles. "Not when I punched him to keep him from shooting it."

"My hero," I said, meaning it.

He kissed my hand and vanished in the direction of my house. I turned to my available team-members and said, "Don't just stand there with your eyes hanging out of your heads. Let's get to work."

By the time we'd gotten an enclosure ready for the creature, Chie-Hoon and Selima had returned from up-country, where they'd been watching those damned hopping fish in the act. Just as well, because it took all five of us to maneuver the kangaroo rex safely out of the truck and into captivity.

Most of us wound up with bruises. It was still mad as all hell. It

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slammed each side on the fence in turn (didn't take it but two hops to cross the enclosure either) and once shot up and cracked its head on the overhead wire. That settled it down a bit. I sent Selima to get it some meat.

I couldn't take my eyes off the thing. I hadn't seen one for nine years.

"Another outbreak of kangaroo rexes," said Chie-Hoon, "Just what we needed. I assume it sprang from the kangaroos around Gogol?"

"Last Edges," I said. That didn't surprise me, the EC around Last Edges being almost identical to that around Gogol. "Contact Herders Kozlev and Lizhi up there. Tell them we've been notified. Find out if they've seen any more—"

"The usual drill," said Chie-Hoon.

"The usual drill."

Selima came back. She'd brought one of the snaggers Mike invented—let him do the honors of getting the cell sample while she distracted it with the meat. Or tried to. The snagger doesn't do more than pin-prick, but that was enough to rile the rex into slamming against the fence again, trying to get at Mike while he reeled the sample through the chain-link.

Mike jerked back but the sample came with him. He held it out to me. "Hardly necessary," he said. "I know what we're gonna find."

So did I. There was no doubt in my mind that the sample would match those from the last outbreak gene for gene. The kangaroo rex had settled down, wolfing at the meat Selima had tossed it. "It eats gladrats," said Selima, looking surprised. "It can't be *all* bad."

Not as far as I was concerned, it couldn't be all bad. If it was a Dragon's Tooth, it was a beautifully constructed one—completely viable.

That may need a word of explanation. . . . You see, when they shipped us off to colonize Mirabile, they were into redundancy. We got cold-storage banks of every conceivable species. (I use the "we" loosely; I'm third-generation Mirabilan myself.) But on top of that we also got the redundancy built right into the gene helices of all the stored species. Some bright-eyed geneticist back on Earth had apparently gotten *that* idea just before the expedition set off: genes within genes, helices tucked away inside other helices.

It was a good idea in theory. If we lost a species (*and* lost the ability to build it ourselves), sooner or later it would pop up spontaneously—all it needed was the right environmental conditions. Given the right EC, every hundredth turtle would lay an alligator egg.

In practice, it was a rotten idea. We'll never lack for alligators, not on Mirabile. They didn't tell us how to turn off those hidden helices, or if they did, the technique was only described in that part of ship's files we'd

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lost. So we Jasons have a running battle with cattle that are giving birth to reindeer and daffodils seeding iris (or worse—cockroaches).

Meanwhile, in the manner of all genes, the hidden genes *mixed*. While the turtle genes were reproducing turtles, the alligator genes tucked in with the turtle genes were mixing with god-knows-what. So given the right EC, we got chimera—familiarly known as Dragon's Teeth.

It was possible that the kangaroo rex was just an intermediate, a middle step between a kangaroo and anything from a gerbil to a water buffalo. Right now, however, it was a kangaroo rex, and impressive as all hell.

"You watch it, Mama Jason," Susan said. "I'll do the gene-read." She reached for the sample as if she had a vested interest in the beast herself. *She* figured she did, at least. Must have been all the times she'd made me tell the story of the first outbreak.

She may be the youngest and newest member of the team, but she can do a gene-read with the best of us. I handed the sample over.

Then I just stood there quietly and appreciated it. About three feet tall (not counting the tail, of course), it was already quite capable of surviving on its own. Which meant, more than likely, that its mama would very shortly move its sibling out of storage and into development. Chances were pretty good that one would be a kangaroo rex, too. Since the mama hadn't abandoned this one, it seemed unlikely she'd abandon another. I wondered if there were enough of them for a reliable gene pool.

The rex had calmed down now that it had eaten—now that most of the excitement was over. It was quietly investigating the enclosure, moving slowly on all fours. Hunched like that, it looked a lot like a mythological line-backer about to receive. With those small front legs, you never expect the thing (even a regulation kangaroo) to have the shoulders it does.

As it neared the side of the fence that I was gaping through, it yawned—the way a cat does, just to let you know it has weapons. I stayed quiet and still. It didn't come any closer and it didn't threaten any further.

That was a good sign, as far as I was concerned. Either it was full or it didn't consider me prey. I was betting it didn't consider me prey. Still, it *was* nasty-looking, which wasn't going to help its case, and it was still a baby. Adult, if it were a true kangaroo rex, it would stand as high as its kangaroo mother—six or seven feet.

In the outbreak of them we'd had nine years back near Gogol, they'd been herd animals. There had been some twenty-odd, with more on the way, of course. Chie-Hoon tells me kangaroos come in "mobs," which seemed appropriate for the kangaroo rexes as well, if a little weak-sounding. And we'd wiped out the last group wholesale.

Oh, I'd yelled and screamed a lot. At the very least, I'd hoped we could stash the genes so we could pull them out if we ever needed the creature

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for some reason. I got voted down, and I got voted down, and finally I got shouted down.

This time would be different.

The kangaroo rex sat back on its tail and began to wash, using its tongue and paws as prettily as any cat. In the midst of cleaning its whiskers, it froze, glanced up briefly, then went back to preening.

That was the only warning I had that Leo was back. He hadn't lost the ability to move softly with the passage of years. He put his arm around me and I leaned into him, feeling a little more than cat-smug myself, though I hadn't done anything to deserve it. Maybe *because* I hadn't done anything to deserve it.

"Pretty thing," Leo said softly, so as not to startle it. "Now I understand why you wanted to keep them."

"This time we *are* keeping them," I said.

There was a clatter of the door behind me. The kangaroo rex bounced to the furthest side of the enclosure, hit the fence on the second bounce, and froze, jaws agape and threatening.

"I know what you're thinking, Annie," Mike said. "You'd better come talk to these guys first. You're not going to like what you hear."

Herders Jarlskog and Yndurain were not inclined toward leniency, especially not Jarlskog, who had worked himself up into a fine sense of outrage. To hear him tell it, you'd have thought a mob of rexes had eaten his entire flock, plus several of his children. So the entire town was already in an uproar.

I halfway agreed with their sentiments. I like the occasional lamb chop just as much as the next guy—especially the way Chris cooks them up at Loch Moose Lodge—and this was one of only seven flocks on all of Mirabile. Sheep here are labor-intensive. They can't be trusted to graze unattended: forever eating something native that'll poison them. So we keep only the seven flocks and we keep them on a strict diet of Earth fodder.

All this means that they have to be kept behind fences and that the plant life in there with 'em has to be policed regularly. That's one of the reasons all the flocks are on the fringes of the desert—it's easier to irrigate the plant life into submission.

The result of all this is that we eat a lot more kangaroo tail soup than we eat lamb curry. The kangaroos fend for themselves quite nicely, thank you, and there's no shortage of them.

Jarlskog wanted me to arrange an instant shortage of kangaroo rexes. So did Yndurain. In an hour's time, the rest of the town would start calling in with the same demand. I soothed them by telling them I'd have

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a team up there by the end of the day. In the meantime, they were to shoot only if they saw a rex actually in with the sheep.

They grumbled some but agreed. When I canceled the call, I turned to Leo. "What do you think? Will they go right out and shoot every kangaroo in sight?"

"No," he said. "Janzen and Moustafa are good kids. I think they can put a damper on the hysteria. Once I convinced Moustafa the rex was mine, he was even willing to help me catch it."

"It took a bit of convincing, though." I glanced significantly at his skinned knuckles.

He grinned and shrugged. "In the heat of passion." His face turned serious and he added, "He *will* shoot any roo that jumps that fence today, though, so if you want to head up there, now's the time."

Mike handed me a sheaf of hard copy. It was the list of everybody who lived in a hundred mile radius of the spot where the rex had turned up. "Good news," he said. "We only have to worry about twenty families."

That is the only advantage I know of being underpopulated. For a moment, I considered not issuing a general alert. After all, for all we knew, there was only *one* kangaroo rex and it was in our backyard.

Mike read my mind and shook his head. "If you want to keep them, Annie, you better not risk having one of them eat some kid."

"It was only an idle thought," I told him. "Put out a notification. Keep the kids in, keep the adults armed. But add that I don't want them shot unless it's absolutely necessary."

Chie-Hoon said, "Annie, we're not going to go through this *again*, are we?"

"Damn straight, we are," I said, "and this time I intend to win! Who's coming with me?"

"Me," said Leo.

"And me," said Susan, looking up from her monitor. "It *is* the same kangaroo rex as last time, Mama Jason, only I've got two secondary helices here. They're both marsupial, but more than that I can't tell you offhand. It'll take the computer all night to search."

"Let me have a look first," Chie-Hoon said. "Maybe I'll recognize something. I have a vested interested in marsupials, after all."

Everybody's got to have a hobby. Chie-Hoon's is the Australian Guild, meaning Chie-Hoon knows more than anybody could ever want to about the customs and wildlife of Earth's "Australia," which includes about ninety percent of the marsupials found in ship's records.

"Help yourself," I said. I'd never found the time to join any of the Earth Authentic Guilds myself—if I were looking for a hobby I rather thought I'd make it Leo—but this was the sort of thing that came in handy. "Since Leo volunteers to come along, we'll leave you to it."

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We're habitually short-handed, and since I'd worked with Leo once before I knew he and I could handle just about anything that came up. As for Susan, well, Earth-authentic wild horses couldn't have kept her away.

Mike looked glum. "I get stuck with the fish, right?"

"And Selima," I pointed out, which brightened him up considerably. (I'm rather hoping those two will decide to help alleviate our underpopulation problem one of these fine days. I'm giving them every opportunity.) "We'll be in touch."

"We'll argue," Mike assured me.

We took my skimmer. Leo, being retired (hah!), no longer rates up-to-date equipment. We let Susan drive and scandalized her by necking in the back seat. When we'd caught up a bit on old times, we broke the clinch.

"Why will you argue?" Leo asked.

"You remember, Noisy. Mama Jason wanted to keep the kangaroo rexes the last time they cropped up. Mike and Chie-Hoon didn't."

"A *lot* of people didn't want them kept," I said. "I lost that round."

"It's not going to be any easier this time," Leo said. "Both those herders were—if you'll pardon the expression—hopping mad."

Susan giggled. So did I.

"I know. But I'm older and meaner this time around."

" 'Meaner'?" That was Susan."Mama Jason, *last* time one of the damn things almost chewed your foot off!"

"D'you think I could forget something like that?" I leaned on the back of the seat and glared at her in the mirror. "That has nothing to do with it."

" 'You never know what might be useful in the long run.' I know," Susan said. "It's not as if we're going to pick up and go back to Earth if we run out of sheep, either."

I gave a sidelong glance at Leo. "Just what I needed: somebody who quotes my own words back at me. . . ."

"You've only yourself to blame," he said.

"Thanks," said Susan, to let us both know she took this little routine as a compliment. "Now tell me who took what side last time around, and what you expect them to do this time."

"It was me against them," I admitted. When Susan whistled, I stuck in, "I almost got Mike to go along with me, but in the end, that wouldn't have made any difference. Mike didn't have much pull then."

"Meaning he was about the same age I am now," said Susan, "so my opinion won't swing much weight either."

"I had intended to be tactful."

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Leo raised an eyebrow at me. "That's not like you, Annie. Do you need the allies that badly? It occurs to me that you swing a bit more weight these days yourself."

"Oh, considerably. But that won't do me a lot of good unless I can convince people like Jarlskog and Yndurain that the rexes are worth keeping. For god's sake, Leo! What's to stop them from simply shooting down every one they see? *We* certainly haven't the hands to police every last bit of territory, especially not Last Edges or Gogol or the like."

Last Edges has a total population of fifty. That's minute, but it's five times the number of people I've got to work with.

"Most people understand enough about ecological balance to follow the guide-lines you folks set," Leo said, but with a bit of a rising inflection.

"If I tell them it's 'Earth-authentic," sure. But this one isn't. Furthermore, nobody in his right mind likes it."

"*I* like it," Susan said. When I didn't respond to that, she said in a small amused voice, "Oh," then giggled, then sighed in resignation. "So what do we do?"

"Nothing, until we check out the situation locally."

The local situation hadn't simmered down while it waited for our arrival. Not that I'd expected it to, but I could see that both Susan and Leo had. A third of the adults were guarding the sheep field with guns. Another third, I imagine, was guarding the kids likewise. The rest turned out to be a combination welcoming committee and lynch mob. Read: *we* were welcome, the kangaroo rexes were most emphatically not.

I listened to the babble without a word for all of twenty minutes, motioning for Susan and Leo to do the same. Best to let them get as much of it out of their systems as possible while we waited for a couple of leaders to sort themselves out of the crowd—then we'd know who and what we were actually dealing with.

In the end, there were two surprises. The first was that someone was dispatched to "Go get Janzen. Right now." When Janzen arrived, Janzen got thrust to the fore. Janzen was about Susan's age. He looked at me, cocked an eyebrow at Leo who nodded and grinned, then he grinned at me and stuck out his hand. That was when I noticed the striking resemblance the kid had to Leo. I cocked an eyebrow at Leo, whose grin got wider.

Janzen took care of shutting down the general noise level and introducing us to the population at large. Leo got introduced by his previous job description—as Leonov *Opener* Denness—and yes, Leo was Janzen's grandad. Both of which upped our status exactly the way Janzen had intended them to. At a bet, a lot of the local kids had been through a survival course or two with Leo.

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The second surprise wasn't nearly as pleasant. The other speaker for the populace—read 'loudmouth' in this case—was none other than Kelly Herder Sangster, formerly a resident of Gogol. She'd wanted the kangaroo rexes near Gogol wiped out and she wanted the same thing here and *now*.

I knew from experience how good she was at rousing rabble. She'd done it at Gogol. I could talk myself blue in the face, put penalties on the shooting of a rex, but I'd lose every one of them to "accidental" shootings if I couldn't get the majority of the crowd behind me.

Sangster squared off, aimed somewhere between me and Janzen, shoved back her hat, bunched her fists on her hips, and said, "They eat sheep. Next thing you know they'll be eating our kids! And Cryptobiology sends us somebody who loves Dragon's Teeth!"

She pointed an accusing finger at me. "When they attacked us in Gogol, *she* wanted to keep them! Whaddaya think about that?" The last was to the crowd.

The crowd didn't think much of that at all. There was much muttering and rumbling.

"I think," I said, waiting for the crowd to quiet enough to listen, "I'd like to know more about the situation before I make any decisions for or against."

I looked at Janzen. "You were the first to see it, I'm told. Did it eat your sheep?"

"No, it didn't," he said. That caused another stir and a bit of a calm. "It was in the enclosure—but it was chasing them, all of them, the way a dog does when it's playing. To be fair, I don't know what it would have done when it caught them. We caught it before we could find out." He looked thoughtful. "But it seems to me that it had plenty of opportunity to catch a sheep and didn't bother. Moustafa? What do you think?"

Moustafa rubbed his sore jaw, glowered at Leo, and said, very grudgingly, "You're right, Janzen. It was like the time Harkavy's dog got into the sheep pen—just chased 'em around. Plenty of time to catch 'em but didn't. Just wanted to see them run." He glowered once more. "But for a kangaroo, it's an adolescent. Maybe it hasn't learned to hunt yet. That might have been practice."

"I concede the point," I said, before Sangster could use it to launch another torpedo. "The next thing I need to know is, how many of them are there?"

As if prompted (perhaps he was, I hadn't been watching Leo for the moment), Janzen said, "For all I know, only the one." He looked hard at Sangster. "You see any?"

Sangster dropped her eyes. "No," she muttered, "not since Gogol." She

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raised her eyes and made a comeback, "No thanks to Jason Masmajean here."

Janzen ignored that. "Anybody else?"

"That doesn't mean a damn thing, Janzen, and you know it," someone said from the crowd. "For all we know, the entire next generation of kangaroos will be Dragon's Teeth—and *that* would be a shitload of kangaroo rexes!"

"I say we get rid of them while there's only one," Sangster put in. "I'm for loading my shotgun and cleaning the roos out *before* they sprout Dragon's Teeth!"

"Now I remember!" I said, before the crowd could agree with her, "*You're* the one that's allergic to roo-tail soup!"

"I'm not allergic—I just don't like it," she snapped back, before thinking it through.

"Well," said Janzen, "*I* like roo-tail soup, so I'd just as soon consider this carefully before I stick myself with nothing but vegetable for the rest of my life."

"Rest of your life. . . ." Sangster sneered at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'll take that question," I said. "If you've a genuine outbreak of kangaroo rexes here, instead of a one-shot, then you'll have to destroy all the kangaroos. That's what was done at Gogol. Gogol can never let the kangaroo herds—"

" 'Mobs' " corrected Sangster, "Kangaroos come in mobs, not herds."

"Gogol can never let the kangaroos *mob* again. Any kangaroo found in that EC is shot. The environmental conditions there are such that sooner or later any kangaroo around Gogol will produce a kangaroo rex." I gave a long look through the crowd. "I won't lie to you: Last Edges has roughly the same EC as Gogol did. Which means you may have to face the same decision. As for me, I'd wait to find out if the rexes eat sheep before I decide to kill off all the roos."

"Sounds fair," said Janzen, almost too promptly. "How do we go about this?"

"First, I want a good look at your EC. I want to see, if you haven't scuffed it up too much, where you spotted the rex. Then we do a little scounting of the surrounding area." I grinned over my shoulder at Leo. "Luckily, we have somebody who's an old hand at that."

"Luckily," agreed Janzen.

"But I could also use some additional help." I looked straight at Sangster—I wanted her where I could keep an eye on her and where she couldn't rabble-rouse while I was busy. "What do you say, Sangster? Willing to put in a little effort?"

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What could she say? She just said it with all the bad grace she could muster.

"Take Janzen, too," came a voice from the crowd. Aha! there were two factions already. "Yes," agreed another voice, "You go with 'em, Janzen. *You* like roo soup."

"In the meantime," I said, "stick to the precautions we already discussed. However—if anyone spots a rex, I want you to notify us immediately. Don't shoot it."

"Oh, yes, right. Don't shoot it," Sangster mocked.

I looked at her as if she were nuts. "Look," I said, "if there *are* more than one, it can lead us to the rest of the mob. Or would you rather just hunt them by guess and by golly? I don't have the time myself. Are *you* volunteering?"

That was the right thing to say, too. So I added one last filip. "Susan?" Susan edged forward. "Susan will be in charge of collecting the gene samples from each sheep, simply as a precaution."

This did not make Susan happy—she wanted to go haring off after the kangaroo rexes—but I knew she wouldn't argue with me in public. "Sample each?" she said.

"That's right. I don't want a single one lost. After all, who knows what genes they've got hidden in those? Might be, one of them can sprout the Shmoo."

That brought a bit of laughter—the Shmoo's a legendary creature that tastes like everything good and drops dead for you if you look at it hungry. The ultimate Dragon's Tooth, except that Sangster would never use that derogatory term for something she *approved* of.

The crowd approved our plan, especially the part about collecting gene samples from each sheep. It was a nuisance to do, but I knew it would settle them down. Herders know as well as anybody how desperately we need diversity within a species. I was offering to clone any sheep we lost to the rexes in the process of my investigation. That meant they'd lose the time it took to bring the sheep back to breeding age, but that they wouldn't lose any genetic variation.

Moustafa volunteered to help Susan with the sampling. So did a handful of others. Then the rest of the crowd dispersed, leaving us to get down to business at last.

Moustafa led the way to the sheep pen where Janzen and Leo had bagged my baby rex. The enclosure looked like every single one I've ever seen, identical to those at Gogol, identical to every other one in Last Edges as well, no doubt. It *sounded* like the crowd had—lots of milling, scuffling, and bleating.

The moment we rounded the corner and saw the sheep, I had to clamp my jaw hard to keep from laughing. The sheep were an eye-popping sky-

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blue, every single one of them! Susan *did* burst into laughter. I elbowed her hard in the ribs. "Don't you dare laugh at Mike's sheep," I told her.

Mike had been trying for a breed that could eat Mirabilan plant life without killing itself. What he'd gotten was a particularly hardy type that tasted just as good as the original, but sprouted that unbelievable shade of blue wool. Mike had promptly dubbed them "Dylan Thomas sheep," and offered them out to the herders. Janzen and Moustafa had obviously taken him up on the offer.

Susan simmered down, just barely, to giggles. "But, Mama Jason," she said, "all this fuss because a Dragon's Tooth might eat a Dragon's Tooth. . . ."

And at that Janzen laughed too. He looked at Susan. "I hadn't thought of it that way, but, now that you mention it, it is funny." He cocked an eyebrow at Mosutafa, who sighed and said, "You always were nuts, Janzen. Yeah. It's funny."

Moustafa looked at me more seriously, though. "But we can't afford to lose many. It's not as if we've got a high population to play around with. We don't even dare interbreed them with the Earth-authentics until we've built up the flock to twice this size or more."

I nodded. The kid was as sensible as Janzen. I wasn't surprised he'd taken a shot at the rex. In his position, I probably would have too. Hell, I'd have done it if they'd been the Earth-authentics. Why mess around? "Okay, Susan," I said, "Start with this flock. Make sure you get one of each."

If the artificial wombs were free this winter, I'd see Mike's pet project doubled, whether we needed them or not. Pretty damn things once you got over the initial shock. They smelled godawful, of course, but what sheep doesn't? The wool made beautiful cloth and even more beautiful rugs. It was already something of a posh item all over Mirabile.

"All yours," I said to Susan, and she and Moustafa set to work.

I followed Leo along the fence, watching where I put my feet. When you've got an expert tracker, you stay out of his way and let him do his job. Janzen knew this just as well as I did, so he was the one, not me, who grabbed Sangster to keep her from overstepping Leo and messing up any signs of the rex.

It wasn't long before Leo stopped and pointed us off across the sheep field. I shouldered my gear and we set out to track the kangaroo rex.

Tracking a kangaroo isn't as easy as you might think, even with the help of a world-class tracker like Leo. (I'm not so bad at it myself. Neither is Janzen, as it turns out.) These kangaroos were reds (I don't mean the warning-light red that signals that some critter is about to chain up to something else; I mean a lovely tawny animal red) and *they* are world-

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class distance jumpers, especially when they're panicked. They had been by Moustafa's rifle shot, which meant they'd been traveling in leaps of fifteen to twenty feet. So it was check the launch spot, then cast about for the landing and subsequent relaunch.

It was only guesswork that we were following the rex's mother anyway. We wouldn't know her to look at her. Only a full gene-read could tell us that. I'd have to sample most of the roos in the mob to find out how many of them were capable of producing baby rexes.

Sangster bent down to uproot a weed or two. When I frowned at her for taking the time, she held out the plant to me and said, "That'll kill a sheep as sure as a kangaroo rex will."

Janzen looked over. "Surer," he said. "I still don't know if kangaroo rexes eat sheep." To me, he added, "But that will poison one. That's lambkill."

I almost laughed. Like any Mirabilan species we've had occasion to work with, it has a fancy Latin name, but this was the first I'd heard its common name. The fancy Latin name is an exact translation. Sounded like Granpa Jason's work to me.

Sangster stooped to pull another. Curious how small they were. Must mean they policed the fields *very* carefully. These were newly sprouted. I spotted one and pulled it myself, then stuck my head up and looked for Leo again. He'd found the next set of footprints.

Good thing the roos have such big feet. In this kind of wiry, springy scrub we wouldn't have had much chance otherwise. Leo wiped sweat from his forehead and pointed toward the oasis in the distance. "Chances are they'll be there, including our rex's mother. In this heat, they'll be keeping to the shade to conserve water." He glanced at Janzen. "Is that the only natural source of water in the area?"

Janzen nodded.

I squinted into the shimmer. The plants had that spiky look of Mirabilan vegetation. There was a distinct break between the Earth-authentic lichens and scrub, then a fence, then a broad strip of desert, then the dark green of the Mirabilan oasis. The broad strip of desert was maybe twenty hops for a roo, or looked that way from this angle.

"Even the roos are a problem," Sangster observed. "They can hop the fence—they bring the lambkill seeds in on their fur."

"It'd blow in from there," I said. "Same as it did at Gogol." I couldn't help it. I'd been wondering ever since I first spotted her in the crowd. "Herder Sangster, what made you leave Gogol?"

Sangster scowled, not exactly at me. "It's Crafter Sangster now. I lost my flock, seventy percent of it anyway."

Leo said, "To the kangaroo rexes?"

She just about glared him into the ground. "To the lambkill," she said.

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"After we got rid of the rexes and the roos that bred them, the lambkill was still there. Worse than ever, it seemed."

"Yes," Janzen put in. "When Moustafa and I were deciding where to raise Mike's flock of Thomas sheep, I did some checking in the various areas available. Something in the EC here makes the lambkill less prevalent . . . or less deadly perhaps. The death count attributable to it isn't nearly as high here as it is around Gogol." He cocked his head, which made his resemblance to Leo all the stronger. "Say! Maybe you could find out what the difference is?"

"Maybe I could," I said, making it clear I would certainly look into the problem. "But for now let's find those roos. I'll put Susan on soil and vegetation samples as soon as she's done with sheep."

To my surprise, he frowned. "Isn't she a little young . . . ?"

"When's *your* birthday?" I asked him. When he told me, I said, "Yeah, I guess from your point of view she is a little young. You've got two months on her."

"Oops," said Janzen. "Sorry."

"No skin off my nose," I told him.

Leo grinned and slapped Janzen on the shoulder. "Would be skin off *his* if Susan had heard him, though. Rightly, too." Leo put an easy arm around Janzen's shoulder. "Susan's the one who developed the odders, Janz. You know, the neo-otters that keep the canals around Torville free of clogweed?"

Janzen looked rightly impressed. Good for Leo, I thought, rub it in just enough so the lesson takes.

"Besides," Leo said, "if age had any bearing on who gets what job, Annie and I would be sitting in the shade somewhere sipping mint juleps and fanning ourselves. Now, could we get on with this before we all, young and old alike, melt?"

So we did. The strip of desert was wider than I'd thought. We'd need that spring as much as the roos did. Of course, they were quite sensibly lying in the shade (drinking mint juleps, no doubt, whatever *they* were—I'd have to remember to ask Leo about that later), going nowhere until the cool of evening.

We'd lost our specific roo (if we'd ever had her) on the broad rocky flat that lay between the strip of desert and the oasis. We paused in the first bit of welcoming shade.

Without a word, Leo signed the rest of us to wait while he moved further in to scout the location of the mob without panicking it. I handed him the cell-sampler. If he saw anything that looked like a rex, I wanted an instant sample. I needed to know if more than one mother was breeding them.

For a long while, it was quiet, except for the sound of running water

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and the damned yakking of the chatterboxes. Every planet must have something like this—it's simply the noisiest creature in the EC. It keeps up a constant racket unless something disturbs it. When the chatterboxes shut up, you know you're in trouble. Most people think the chatterboxes are birds, and that's good enough most ways—they fly, they lay eggs, what more could you ask of birds?

I, for one, prefer that my birds have feathers. Technically speaking, feathers are required. The chatterboxes are a lot closer to lizards. I guess the closest Earth-authentic would be something like a pterodactyl, except that all the pterodactyl reconstructions in ship's files showed them brown or green. I wonder what the paleontologists back on Earth would have made of ours.

The chatterboxes, besides being noisy, are the most vivid colors imaginable—blues and reds and purples and yellows—and in some of the most tasteless combinations you can imagine. They make most Mirabilan predators violently ill, which shouldn't come as much of a surprise. The eggs are edible though, and not just to *Mirabilan* predators.

We watched and listened to the chatterboxes, thinking all the while, I'm sure, that we ought to bring home some eggs if we lucked onto a nest.

Then Leo was back.

He leaned close and spoke in a quiet voice. The chatterboxes kept right on. "Annie, I've found the mob, but I didn't see anything that looked like a rex—nothing out of the ordinary at all. Just browsing kangaroos."

"Chances are, mine is the first one, then. Do you think we can all get a look without sending them in all directions?"

"Depends on *your* big feet."

"Thanks," I told him.

The whole bunch of us headed out as quietly as we knew how. I'd been worried about Sangster, but she'd obviously taken the kids' training course to heart—she was as quiet as the rest of us.

We worked our way through sharpscrub, dent-de-lion, careless weed, spurts, and stick-me-quick. It was mostly uphill. The terrain here was mostly rock with a very slender capping of soil. Leo brushed past a stand of creve-coeur and collected a shirtful of its nasty burrs, saving us all from a similar fate. I didn't envy him the task of picking them out.

At last Leo stopped us. Kneeling, he slid forward, motioning me to follow. Our faces inches apart, we peered through a small stand of lighten-me.

There was the tiny trickle of stream that fed this oasis. In the shade of the surrounding trees lolled the mob of kangaroos, looking for the moment not so much like a mob as like a picnic luncheon. There were perhaps twenty in clear view, and not a striped hip among them. Still, that meant there were plenty more we couldn't see.

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It was also quite possible that the mother of our rex had been ostracized because of her peculiar offspring. That happened often enough with Dragon's Teeth.

Beside me there was an intake of breath. The chatterboxes paused momentarily, then, to my relief, went right back to their chattering. Sangster pointed into the sharpscrub to my left.

I caught just the quickest glimpse of stripes, followed it to the end of its bound. As it knelt on its forepaws to drink from the stream, I could see it had the face and jaw of a red kangaroo, but the haunches were very faintly striped. I nodded to her. Good bet, that one. Different enough to be worth the first check.

Taking the cell-sampler back from Leo, I backed up—still on my hands and knees—and skinned around to get as close as I could. (Skinned being the operative word in that EC. My palms would never be the same.) Just at that moment, two of the adolescents started a kicking match.

Their timing was perfect. I took advantage of the distraction, rose, tiptoed forward, and potted Striped Rump with the sampler. It twitched and looked around but wasn't in the least alarmed. All it did was lean back on its tail and scratch the area with a forepaw, for all the world like a human slob.

Very slowly, I reeled in the sample. (I've startled too many creatures reeling in samples not to be aware of that problem.) Once I had it, I stashed it in my pack, reloaded, and popped a second roo, this time a male—all chest and shoulders, a good seven-footer. If the rexes got that big, I would be awfully hard put to convince anybody they should be kept.

Not that it looked menacing now. It was lying belly-up in the deep shade, with its feet in the air. Just now, it looked like some kid had dropped a stuffed toy.

I knew better: Mike had gotten into an altercation with a red that size once, and it had taken three hundred and forty-one stitches to repair the damage. Roos use their claws to dig for edible roots. They panic, those claws'll do just as efficient a job digging holes in your face.

Two sampled. I figured the best thing to do was keep sampling as long as I could. I got eleven more without incident. Then I almost walked into the fourteenth.

Its head jerked up from the vie-sans-joie it and its joey were browsing. The joey dived headfirst into mama's pouch.

I knew it was all over, so I shot the sampler at the mother point-blank, as the joey somersaulted to stare at me wide-eyed between its own hind feet. Mama took off like a shot.

Next thing I knew, the chatterboxes were in the air, dead silent except

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for the sound of their wings, and every kangaroo was bounding every which way.

Janzen and Leo were on their feet in the same moment, dragging Sangster to hers as well. Less chance of being jumped on if the roos were stampeding *away* from you. Leo bellowed at them, just to make sure.

Trouble is, you can't count on a roo to do anything but be the damn dumb creature it is—so three of them headed straight *for* Leo and company.

Janzen dived left. Still bellowing, Leo dived right. And there stood Sangster, right in the middle, unable to pick a direction. She took one step left, a second right—that little dance that people do in the street just before they bump into each other.

Striped Rump was still aimed straight for her.

I raised my shotgun and aimed for Striped Rump. "No, Annie!" Leo shouted. But I was thinking of Mike—I sighted.

Three things happened at once: Leo hooked a foot at Sangster's ankle and jerked her out of the path of the roo, Janzen bellowed louder than ever I'd heard Leo manage, and I squeezed the trigger.

Striped Rump touched one toe to the ground and reversed direction in mid-leap. My shot passed over its shoulder as it bounded away from Sangster. By the time the shot had finished echoing off the rocks, there wasn't a roo to be seen anywhere.

I charged over to where Leo was picking Sangster up and dusting her off. Polite full-body-check, that was. From his nod, she was just fine, so I spared a glance for Janzen, who seemed likewise.

"Dammit, woman!" Leo said. "What happened to 'Don't shoot unless it's absolutely necessary'? That was your likeliest prospect."

"The hell with you, Leo. *You've* never seen anybody mangled by a roo." It came out tired. The adrenaline rush was gone and the heat was suddenly unbearable. "I'm not in the mood to be scolded right now. You can do it later, when I'm ready to thank you for saving old Striped Rump."

I glared at Sangster. "If you're fit to travel, I vote we get the hell out of this sun and let me process my samples."

She opened her mouth, a little round 'o' of a shape, as if to say something. Then she just nodded.

We slogged our way back across the sheep range. By the time we reached the shade of Janzen's digs, I was unpissed enough to growl at Leo, "What's a mint julep? Maybe I could use one."

Leo shot a sidelong glance at Janzen, who grinned and said, "You *know* I keep the mixings. You also know you're all welcome to stay at my place." He cocked his head slightly to the side, "If you don't tell Susan what an idiot I am."

"We'll let her find out on her own," Leo said.

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Which settled that—and us as well.

I was almost into the welcome shade of Janzen's house when Sangster grabbed at my arm. I turned—the look on her face was downright ferocious. Here it comes again, I thought. Death to the kangaroo rex!

Instead, she demanded, "Why?" That ferocious look was still there.

I blinked. "Why *what*, dammit?"

"Why did you shoot at that damned roo?"

Some people just don't get it, ever. I shook my head and sighed. "Humans are the most endangered species on Mirabile," I said, "and you want to know why I fired?"

That was all I had the patience for. I turned on my heel, yanked away from her, and fairly dived into the coolness of Janzen's house, letting the door slam behind me as my final word on the subject.

The mint julep improved my outlook no end, so I keyed into Janzen's computer (rank hath its privileges) and entered the samples I'd picked up. While I was waiting for my readout, I checked my office files to see what the rest of the team had come up with.

First thing I got was a real pretty schematic of my kangaroo rex. It was an even neater bit of engineering than I'd thought at first—the teeth at the side of the jaws (they were two inches long!) worked across each other, like butchers' shears. What with the 180 degree jaw span, that would give it an awesome ability to shear bone. Sheep bone was well within its capabilities.

That still didn't mean it ate sheep, but it didn't help the cause any.

Next I got the gene-reads on the secondary helices. Didn't recognize either worth a damn. Neither had Chie-Hoon, because there was a note appended that said simply, "Annie: Sorry, neither of these looks familiar to me. We're checking them against ship's records now. Let you know what we find."

That'd be sometime the next day. A search and match takes entirely too much time, always assuming that there *is* a match. Lord only knew what was in those portions of ship's records we'd lost in transit.

The gene-read on Striped Rump was about what I'd expected, just a few twists off normal red kangaroo.

"Roo stew?" said a voice behind me.

"Sure," I said, without looking up, "still perfectly edible, despite those." I tapped the offending genes on the monitor.

"Janzen," said Leo's voice, "No point talking to her when she's reading genes. She's not talking about the same thing you are."

That was enough to make me turn away from the screen. I looked at Janzen. "Sorry," I said, "What was it you wanted to know?"

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"I just asked if you'd mind having roo stew for dinner. I intend to eat a lot of roo while I still have the option."

"Say yes, Annie." That was Leo again. "Janzen and Moustafa make the best roo stew I've ever had. Even Chris couldn't beat their recipe."

Chris is the best chef on Mirabile. Like Susan, she's one of Elly's kids. She's one of the reasons Loch Moose Lodge is my favorite vacation spot.

"That's some recommendation! Can I get in on this?" That was Susan. "I put the sheep samples in the truck, Mama Jason; all set for in vitro in case we need them. Is that your rex breeder? Sangster won't talk about what you guys found—what did you do to her? Threaten her with a corn crop that sprouts cockroaches?"

"One thing at a time," I said. "Janzen, yes, thank you. I'm extremely fond of roo myself. Will there be enough for Susan too, or shall I make her eat rations?"

Susan threatened to punch me. Janzen grinned at her and said, "Plenty enough, Susan. Now I know why Leo wants to hook up with Annie. Just his type."

To change the subject, I tapped the monitor again and said, "That's our most likely candidate for rex breeder. I was just about to check for secondary helices. You can watch over my shoulder—unless you want to watch how Janzen and Moustafa make stew. The recipe'd make a good birthday present for Chris . . . ?"

Susan looked horribly torn for a brief moment. Janzen grinned at her again and said, "I'll write out our recipe for you, Susan. You stick here and tell me what I need to know about the kangaroo rexes." The kid had a *lot* in common with his granddad.

While Susan pulled up a chair, I turned back to the monitor and started reading genes again. Yup, there was a secondary helix, all right. I split the screen, called up the gene-read on my kangaroo rex, and compared the two. No doubt about it. "Thanks for saving old Striped Rump, Leo. She's it."

I stored that to send back to the lab and called up the next sample. "Let's see how many other rex breeders we've got."

By the time Moustafa dished out the roo stew, I'd found two more rex breeders in the sample of thirteen. And they were all remarkably consistent about it.

"Hell," said Leo.

"Not exactly, Noisy," Susan said. "That means most likely the kangaroo rex is an intermediate for an Earth authentic."

I was momentarily more interested in the stew than in anything else. It lived up to Leo's billing. I was still trying to place the spices Janzen

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and Moustafa used when Leo laid a hand on my arm to get my attention. "Mmmph?" I said, through a mouthful.

"You've got to train your assistants to use less jargon," he said.

I scooped up another forkful of stew and simply eyed Susan.

"Oops," she said. "Sorry, Noisy. A true Dragon's Tooth is usually a chimera—bits and pieces of the genetic material of two very different species. Even a plant-animal combination's possible. But it's not consistent.

"If we've got three roos that are going to at some time produce rexes, all of which are close enough genetically to interbreed, then most likely it's *not* a Dragon's Tooth. Most likely it's the first visible step on the chain up to another Earth-authentic." She waited anxiously to see if he'd gotten it this time. When he nodded, she dived back into her own dinner. "Great stew, Moustafa, Janzen. I'd sure hate it if we have to kill off the roos."

"Any idea just how big the roo population is?" I asked the two local kids.

They exchanged a glance. Moustafa said, "Couple hundred, maybe. It never occurred to me to count."

Janzen shook his head, meaning it hadn't occurred to him either, then he said, "You can get some idea after dinner. Once the sun goes down, most of them will be out in the pasture, browsing. If it were crops we were raising instead of sheep, they'd be a much bigger nuisance than they are now."

Susan raised a querying brow at him.

"Given any kind of a choice, the roos prefer their food tender, which means they go for young shoots. That'd play havoc with any food crop. Sheep will browse tough stuff that's inedible to most Earth-authentics, and they'll do it right down to the ground."

"Yeah," said Moustafa, "And they're too stupid to know what's poisonous and what isn't."

That reminded me. "Excuse me a minute," I said—but I took my bowl of stew with me while I went to the computer to call up the home team.

I got Mike, which was good luck, and there were no emergencies in the offing, which was better. "I need an EC workup on Gogol. Can you get me one by tomorrow evening?" At his look, I said, "It doesn't have to be complete—just a preliminary: quick and dirty is fine. We'll do a complete if anything interesting shows up." His look hadn't improved, so I added, "Take Selima. With two of you, it'll go faster and won't be quite as dirty."

That fixed the look right up. Ah, young love . . . ain't it handy? "Anything new I should know about?"

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"Yeah." This time he grinned. "Your kangaroo rex didn't recognize lamb as edible."

Behind me, someone said, "All *right*!" on a note of triumph. I ignored that to eye Mike suspiciously. When he said nothing further, I voiced his implied, "But . . . ?"

"But it could learn that trick. Right now its idea of superb cuisine is chatterboxes, grubroots, and gladrats."

Interesting. Those were all Mirabilan, and all pests from our point of view. "That's certainly in its favor," I said. "They're all of a size too—nowhere near the size of sheep."

"Means nothing. There's only one rex on the premises. Who knows what size prey a mob of them will take on."

"I know," I said, "but that gives me more breathing space here." I thought about it a moment, then got an inspiration. "Mike? Try it on those damn jumping fish next time it looks hungry."

That brought a grin from Mike. "Annie," he said, "our luck's not *that* good this summer. Besides, the rexes wouldn't do well in that EC."

"Just try it. And shoot me that EC report as soon as you can." I broke the connection, picked up my bowl, and—still thinking about it—headed back for the dinner table. I almost ran Leo down. I looked around me. The whole troop had been looking over my shoulder. "Sit," I said, "my apologies. We will now give the stew the attention it deserves."

Which we did, and when we were done, it was time for Janzen and Moustafa to see to their sheep for the evening . . . and for me and Leo to place ourselves strategically in the fields to see how many roos showed up to browse—and how many of them were breeding rexes.

We ran into half a dozen of the locals and enlisted three. Susan dug out two more samplers, but those went to Leo and Susan herself. (We're short of equipment. I put that on the docket for winter, making more samplers or finding somebody who wanted the job.)

Sangster was nowhere to be seen. Despite Susan's earlier comment, I had no doubt she was off somewhere raising the level of hysteria. I could have kicked myself for not dragging Sangster in with us that afternoon, just to keep her out of trouble.

It would have been a lovely evening for hanky-panky. Too bad Leo was on the opposite edge of the field. With the sun going down, there was a bit of nip in the air. Dew had started to condense and I was wet to the knees, but I laid out a bit of tarp to sit on and to drag around my shoulders and settled down to count roos.

They weren't much worried about humans, as it turned out. At the moment, that was a plus. If the rexes had the same inclination, though, it would be just one more thing to worry about.

Susan I'd stationed roughly in eye-shot—at least, with the help of a

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good flashlight. But pretty soon I was so busy taking samples that I had no time for more than an occasional check on her. She was taking samples just as furiously as I was.

Moustafa's estimate had been in the hundreds, by which he'd meant maybe two hundred. I'd have guessed more. I counted nearly a hundred within the ring of light my flashlight produced. The flashlight bothered them not at all. They placidly munched at this, that, and the other. About as peaceful as a herd of cows and about as bright: one of the youngsters nibbled my tarp before I tapped its nose. Then it hopped back into mama's pouch and glared at me. Mama went on chewing, while I got samples of both.

In the cool of the evening, they were much more active. The youngsters chased and kicked each other and a lot of mock battles went down, reminding me of nothing so much as the way Susan and Mike behaved.

More than one of the youngsters had striped hips, so I crept as close as I dared while they were occupied with each other, to get samples specifically from them. Once again, a mock battle—great leaps in the air and powerful kicks from those hind legs—covered my movement.

Three older kangaroos paused to look up from their eating but they looked up at the antics of the youngsters with the same kind of wearied eye I had been known to turn on activities of that sort from our younger contingent. Satisfied that the kids weren't getting into any trouble, they went back to what they'd been doing—which was grubbing in the ground, presumably for roots.

You wouldn't believe those claws unless you saw them in action. Once again, I appreciated the muscular shoulders. I frankly didn't see why a kangaroo rex should seem any more ferocious—at first glance, anyhow—than a basic kangaroo. Watching them, I got a tickle in the back of my skull. The stuff they were grubbing up looked familiar. Nova-light is romantic, but not as good for some things as for others. I debated the wisdom of turning my flashlight on them for a better look.

Being old hands, *they* would not be so likely to take my intrusion as lightly as the joey had. I didn't want to start a stampede. There were just too many of them in the general neighborhood. I didn't relish the thought of being run down by several hundred pounds of panicked roo.

The elder roos looked up, suddenly wary. I abandoned my plan and followed their point. Some sort of disturbance at the edge of the mob, very near where I'd last seen Susan. And damned if I could see her now—there were too many adult roos between my position and hers.

The nearby roos got a bit skittish. Two of the adult males bounced once in Susan's direction, froze, and watched. A new mob had joined the browsing.

This was a smaller group. Dominant male, two females, and two match-

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ing joeys. Damned if the male didn't have that striped rump. I didn't dare edge closer, not with the nearby roos nervous already. I held my ground and hoped the quintet of likelies would pass near enough to Susan for her to get a safe shot at sampling them.

But they skirted Susan (now that my brain was working again, I decided I was glad they had) and headed in my direction. Closer examination told me that papa was a roo. Neither of the mamas was, though. To hell with the striped rump—these two were plain and simple kangaroo rexes—and most of the nearby roos didn't like it any more than I did.

Their movements were different. (Well, let's face it—they would be.) Except for the male, they weren't grazing. They were searching the grass for whatever small prey the rest of the roos startled into motion. I could see why they liked to hang around with the browsers. The browsing roos gave them cover and, as often as not, sent gladrats and grubroots right into those waiting jaws.

I couldn't recall when I'd ever heard anything eaten with a snap quite that impressive, either. I eased back down in the grass, hoping they'd get close enough that I could get shots at both the mothers and the joeys. I laid my rifle where I could reach it at a moment's notice and raised my sampler.

To my surprise, the roos around me, after whiffling the air a few times, settled back to their browsing. When the rexes came close, the roos eased away, but didn't panic. Not quite acceptable in polite society, I could see, but nothing to worry about so long as they kept to their own table.

One of the rex joeys pounced after something small in the grass. In the excitement of the chase, it headed straight for me. I popped it with the sampler on the spot and it jumped straight up in the air, came down bouncing the opposite direction, headed for mama. It made a coughing bark the like of which I never heard from a roo.

Mama made the same coughing sound, bounded *over* the joey, and the next thing I knew I was face to face with several hundred pounds of angry rex. The jaws snapped as I brought up my gun. Then something hit me in the shoulder with the force of a freight train. The gun went in one direction, I went in the other, rolling as best I could to keep from being kicked a second time by the papa roo.

A brilliant flash of light struck in our direction, illuminating the mama rex as she came after me. There was a yell and a shot from somewhere behind me. I may have imagined it, but I swear I felt that bullet pass inches from my right ear.

The mama rex stopped in her tracks—stunned, not shot. The rest of the mobs, roos and rexes alike, took off in all directions. The ground shook from their thundering kick-offs and landings.

I scrambled to my feet, the better to dodge if dodging was possible in

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that chaos. It was only then that I realized that some damn fool of a human had the kangaroo rex by the tail, hauling it back as it tried to bound away.

A second damn fool of a human grabbed for the rex's feet, dragging them out from under it so it couldn't kick.

Dammit! They'd forgotten the teeth!

I was moving before I even put a thought to it. Dived, landed roughly on the rex's head and grabbed it about the throat, pulling the jaw closed toward my chest and hanging on for dear life while the thing struggled for all it was worth. It had the worst damn breath of any creature I'd ever gotten that foolishly close to.

Through the haze and the brilliance of the artificial light, I saw sombody race up and plunge a hypodermic needle into the upturned haunch. The rex coughed its outrage and struggled twice as hard. I almost suffocated. I don't even want to think how close its snap came to my ear.

Somebody else was trying to loop a rope around those thrashing hind legs and not being very successful about it. I'd have let go, if I could have thought of a safe way of doing it.

Then all at once the struggle went out of the rex. It kicked weakly a few more times, then went limp, for all the world as if it were too hot a day to do anything but lie around in the shade.

The fellow with the rope said, "Took long enough!" and finished his tying—as neat as any cowboy on ship's film. He whipped another length of rope off his hip, came round to me, and wrapped the length about the jaw, sealing it temporarily shut. Then he stood up, dusted off his hands, and said, "Kelly, you're gonna have to come up with a better mousetrap. Damned if I'm gonna do *that* again!"

Sangster uncrimped herself from the rex's tail and stood to face him. "Thought the Texan Guild would be a damn sight better at hog-tying." The challenge in her voice was unmistakeable. "I guess the Australian Guild will have to handle the rest alone."

"Hell," said the Texan, in that peculiar drawl that identifies members of the guild, "just give us a chance to practice. These things move a sight different than a longhorn."

"You're on," said Sangster. "Now let's get this into the cage before the valium wears off." She turned to me and said, "We'll catch the rest of them for you."

Four of them hefted the limp rex onto their shoulders and started back toward town.

None of it was making sense, least of all Sangster's parting shot. Maybe that roo's kick had caught me in the side of the head after all and I just didn't know it. I felt like walking wounded.

Must have been stunned, because it wasn't until Leo and Susan picked

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up my gun and my cell sampler and caught my elbows on either side that I even remembered to make sure they were okay themselves.

Leo looked about like I felt. Susan was fine, bounding along, half in front of us, half trying to carry me by my elbow, as if she'd caught the bounds from the roos. "Mama Jason," she caroled as she bounced, "I'm so glad you're okay! That was about the most exciting thing that's ever happened to me, *ever*! Wasn't it, Noisy? Have you ever *seen* anything like that in your *life*? Just wait until I tell Chris and Elly and Mike. . . ."

None of that seemed to require any response from me, so I saved my breath for walking.

"*Are* we going to catch the rest of them?" she demanded at last. "What about the rex's joey? Shouldn't we find it? Maybe it wasn't weaned yet."

From the brief look I'd gotten at the joeys, chances were Susan was right. If the rex they'd shot full of valium lived, we'd still lose the rex joey.

But when we rounded the corner, we found a makeshift cage—a big one, much to my relief—built onto a transport trailer that sat right next to Sangster's house. In it was the mama rex, still groggy but unmuzzled now, *and* her joey. At least, I *hoped* it was hers. It was pretty damned angry, but was expending most of its energy to try to get a response out of mama.

The entire town of Last Edges and then some had turned out to gawk. Sangster lounged against the cage like she owned 'em both. When she saw us coming, she nodded and took a few steps to meet us.

"Earth used to have zoos," she said, with no preamble. Glancing at the Texan Guilder, she added, "Ramanathan checked out the references for us in ship's log." She folded her arms across her chest and, with an air of pronouncement, finished, "We've decided we don't mind if you keep them in a zoo. We'll catch the rest of them for you."

That was not what I'd had in mind at all. Still, I wasn't going to make any objection as long as it kept Sangster and her crew from shooting them on sight. "Who's funding this zoo?" I said, "and who's going to catch the grubroots and gladrats to feed them?"

Sangster and the Texan exchanged glances. "We'll talk about it later," she said.

I'll just bet, I thought, but didn't say it. I shrugged and turned to plod back to Janzen's place. I needed a hot soak to get the kinks out. My shoulder was beginning to stiffen from the bruises I'd gotten. (At least, I hoped it wasn't worse than bruises.) "Get that joey something to eat," I said. "They were hunting when you interrupted them. Grubroots will do just fine. That's what it was after."

I left. Somebody would see to it—probably Janzen.

Sangster caught up with me at the door to Janzen's place. "I talked

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the Australian guild into cooperating. I can talk them into funding the zoo, too. Marsupials are *our* jurisdiction. Maybe the rex is an Earth-authentic that got lost with the missing ship's files."

"Maybe," I said, stopping to consider her. Damned strange woman. I was sure from her manner that she was still mad as all hell at me, so none of this made sense. "More likely an intermediate, ready to chain up to an Earth-authentic."

"We want them *off* the sheep range," she said. "It's this or kill the roos again. We talked the Texan Guild into helping us. We can get them all for your zoo."

What could I say? "Until the next batch chains up from the roos." I shrugged one more time.

Sangster scowled deeper. "I saved this pair for you. I talked them into making a zoo. Now we're even."

She practically spat that last at me, then she turned on her heel and stamped away, raising dust with her fury.

Even for *what?* I wondered. *Damn* strange woman, like I said before.

I woke up stiff all over. Susan was balanced on the edge of my cot, barely able to contain herself. "What?" I said.

"They caught the other mama rex and her joey last night, Mama Jason. We get to keep them after all."

"Zoo is *not* my idea of keeping them, dammit. Just sheer luck they haven't killed any of them yet, between the valium and beating them into submission." I tried to get coherent but I'm not ready for mornings, ever. "Read up on zoos—and I don't mean the cursory reading Sangster and her mates did. Zoos always held the *last* individuals of the species: they were a death sentence."

"Oh," she said. "Mike called. He and Selima are up at Gogol, doing that EC check you wanted. He'll have it this evening."

"Good. I want you to do the same here. That I want this evening, too."

"Betcha I'm faster than Mike."

"Better be cleaner, too," I said, "or faster doesn't count."

She grinned at me, bounded off the cot, and was out the door without another word. Guaranteed her report would be both faster and cleaner than Mike's—unless I called Mike and issued the same challenge, that is. I dragged myself out of bed. Breakfast first, to get the mind moving, then to the computer to see what, if anything, was new from the lab.

What was new was a note from Chie-Hoon. "Skipped an emergency meeting of the Australian Guild for this, Annie, so you'd better appreciate it." Appended were reconstructions of the two critters our rexes were planning to chain up to.

Chie-Hoon had a gift for that: take the gene chart and draw from it

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a picture of what the resulting animal would look like. There were no Latin names for 'em, which meant Chie-Hoon hadn't been able to find a gene-read for either in ship's records.

The first one was just a variant on roo. The second was, well, as weird a thing as I'd *ever* seen, including the Mirabilan jumping fish. It had the same jaw and jaw-span as the rexes, but it was a quadruped. The tail wasn't as thick (well, it didn't need the tail for balance the way the roos did) and the hip stripes continued up to the shoulders, narrowing as they went. Basic predator with camouflage stripes.

The pouch opening aimed toward the tail, instead of toward the head. Took me a moment to figure that out—kept the baby from falling out while the critter chased prey, probably also kept it from getting scratched up on creve-coeur in the same circumstances. What it boiled down to was a marsupial version of a wolf. Probably wouldn't stack up too well against the mammalian wolf (a species I'm rather partial to), but it was a fine off-the-wall bit of work nonetheless.

Then I went on to the note from Mike. As Susan had said, he and Selima were on their way. Susan *had* forgotten to pass along the final message . . . which was that my courting present thought the jumping fish were great toys but showed not the slightest interest in eating them. As Mike said, our luck's not *that* good this summer.

"How's the shoulder this morning, Annie?" Leo looked like he'd been up and around for hours already.

"Stiff," I said—and bless his sweet soul, he came right in to massage it—"I appreciate your courting gift all the more, now that I know what kind of fight you went through to catch it for me."

"All in the name of love," he said and I could feel his grin light up the room all around me even if I couldn't see it. "What can I do for you today?"

"Join me on a long, probably useless, but definitely exhausting walk around the sheep fields. Unless you could pick out the spot the Australian Guild grabbed the rex in the daylight?" Probably too much to hope for.

"I can pick it out," he said. "That big a scrabble left signs—and I know about where you were a few moments before."

"What would I do without you?"

So we headed out. The route took us past the caged rexes. Some fifteen people were still standing about staring in at them—some tourist attraction, all right. Safe but scary, as Leo had said once in another context.

I wanted to see how they were faring myself, so I shoved through the crowd. One of the gawkers had a stick and was using it to poke at the baby rex through the bars of the cage. Just to rile it and make its mother charge him.

As I got there, the mother was just rebounding off the wire. I snatched

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the stick out of the bastard's hand and slapped him a good one alongside the head with it. "You like that?" I demanded.

"Hell, no!" he said.

"Then what makes you think that creature does?"

"I—" He looked sheepish for a moment, then defiant. "I just wanted to see them move around some. They weren't doing anything."

"Roos don't do anything in this heat, either. That's their way of conserving water, you damn fool. Who raised you?"

Stunned, he told me.

"Well, they ought to be ashamed of themselves. They damn sure didn't teach you the sense god gave the rexes there."

"Hey! You can't talk about my raisers—"

"Then you oughta stop doing stupid things that lead me to believe they raised you wrong."

That did it. I watched him go all embarrassed.

"Sorry," he said at last. "Everybody else was doing it."

"Then prove to me that you're a cut better. First, you get the rexes some water, so they can replace what they've lost. Then you get that damned Australian Guild to move this into the shade. Then you can stand here and make sure nobody else beats up on the rexes. Then I'll revise my opinion of your raisers. Got that?"

"Yes, *ma'am!*"

Yes, *ma'am*, and he'd do it, too. I was satisfied he'd keep them from being harassed further.

Then I got a chance to look at the rexes. The other joey was dragging a foot. Hellfire and damnation, they'd broken its leg catching it. I roared at Leo, "Get Sangster and her damned Australians down here right now!"

So we spent most of the afternoon coaxing the injured joey out of the cage so we could splint its leg. Zoos, just love 'em. Hope the guy that invented 'em wound up in a cage all his own—in the sun.

Sangster and her mates were apologetic but clearly had no intention of giving up their plan to catch any more rexes that turned up for their zoo. Oughta be a damned law to protect animals from people.

It was cooling toward evening when Leo and I finally set out to look for the spot I had in mind. Something was still niggling me about that, but the whole struggle with the rex had shoved it completely out of my head. I was hoping if I saw the spot again, the same thought might come back.

Leo found it for me in record time. Would have taken me twice as long. He stood in the middle of the spot where the first rex had been when that blinding light and stunning shot hit it all at once. "Now you see if

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you can reconstruct your position from that," he said. "Just pretend I'm a kangaroo rex."

"You haven't got the jaw for it, Leo." I cast about and made some good guesses. They were good enough that I found bits of the broken cell sampler there. I flopped down next to the bits and glanced around. Nothing jogged my memory, so I closed my eyes and tried to see it again.

That worked: the roos (not the rexes) had been digging up plants just *there*. I hauled myself to my feet and went over to look.

The plants the roos had been grubbing up were still there, shriveled in the heat and utterly unrecognizable. Fine. I could still do a gene-read on them if I did it *now*. "Okay," I said, "Back to Janzen's. You can make me a mint julep. If this is what I hope it is, we'll toast Mirabile."

What with one thing and another, I didn't get my gene-read on the withered plants until after dinner. It was just what I expected it to be, so I put in a call to Mike out at Gogol. Mike and Selima couldn't be found for me (aha!) but they'd left their EC run in my file.

"Susan!" I yelled and she came running. "You finish that EC check for me?"

She looked smug. "On file," she said. "Did I beat Mike out?"

I cued up her file. "Mike's was filed roughly the same time as yours but then he had extra hands—Selima was with him."

"Oh," said Susan. "Well, it's only fair to say I had extra hands, too. Janzen helped me." That made her look smugger and set off a second *aha!*, which I did not voice, as much as I enjoyed it.

I read through Susan's EC on Last Edges, then went to Mike's from Gogol a second time, then pulled hard-copy on both. "Gotcha," I said, as the reports stacked up in the printer. "Mint juleps all around, Leo!"

I handed Susan the sheaf of reports and said, "Read 'em. Then tell me how this EC differs from the EC at Gogol." I leaned back in my chair, accepted the mint julep from Leo, and waited to see if Susan would see it too.

After a while, Susan's head came up. She stared at me and her mouth worked, but nothing came out. She handed the sheaf of papers to Janzen, went to the computer, and called up the EC we'd done on Gogol all those years ago, the first time the kangaroo rexes had reared their ugly little heads. She nodded to herself, then pulled hard copy on that too.

She came back with it and added it to the pile Janzen was reading. Then she sat down and said, "To kill the rexes, they have to kill the roos—but if they kill the roos, the *sheep* die."

"What?" said Moustafa and tried to wrest the reports from Janzen, who didn't cooperate. "I don't see it, Susan. I don't know how to read these things."

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She gave him a pitying look but explained: "There are only two significant differences between the EC here and the EC at Gogol. The first is that Gogol has no roos—or very few; they're shot on sight—and the second is that Gogol is awash in lambkill."

Moustafa made a stifled noise deep in his throat. Janzen said, "Does this mean I don't have to give up my roo-tail soup?"

"It means," I said, "that the roos eat the lambkill, which prevents your *sheep* from eating it. You may be willing to give up your roo-tail soup, but how many people in Last Edges are willing to give up their sheep—the way Sangster did after the roos were killed in Gogol?"

I raised my glass. "To Mirabile," I said.

It was Janzen who rang the meeting bell. And what with the Australian Guilders and the Texan Guilders—all of whom were antsy to be back on the range rounding up kangaroo rexes—we had a much larger turnout than expected. There was a lot of jostling and more than one case of bad manners. I had to wonder if the Texan Guild went so far as to call each other out for gunfights, but apparently not, as nobody did.

When they finally all simmered down, I explained the situation to them. I guess I expected them to forgive the rexes on the spot. I should know better at my age.

Sangster said, "Of *course*, the roos eat lambkill! They grub it out right down to the root—*anybody* could have told you that, for god's sake!"

"You don't get it," Janzen shot back. "Kill the roos and the *lambkill* kills the sheep! That's why you lost your flock at Gogol. D'you want the same thing to happen here? *I* sure as hell don't!"

There was a good loud mutter of agreement from the crowd on that one. Sangster stamped her foot and yelled for attention. After a while she got it, but it was a lot more hostile than she was used to.

"Stabilize the roos, then," she said. She glared at me. "You've done it before with domestic herds. Those guernseys that were dropping deer every other generation. You got those stabilized to where they chain up only once every ten years. Are you telling me you can't do the same for our roos—or can't you be bothered? Might mess up your beloved kangaroo rexes."

I didn't get a chance to answer. From the very back of the crowd came an agonized shout: "*No*, Annie! You can't stabilize them! You don't know what the rexes are chaining up to! I do! And you *can't* stabilize the roos!"

I peered over heads and could just barely make out a mop of straight black hair and piercing black eyes. By this time I'd recognized Chie-Hoon's voice, even though I'd never heard the kid quite so worked up about anything.

Before anybody'd had time to react to this, Chie-Hoon was standing

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on a chair, waving a banner-sized picture. I recognized it even from that distance: Chie-Hoon's own reconstruction of the weirder of the two critters our rexes were chaining up to, the one with the jaws.

"Mates!" shouted Chie-Hoon, and had the instant attention of every Australian Guild member there. (When one of the locals made to object to this interruption from a nonresident, he was swiftly stifled by a menacing look from a guilder.) "D'ya recognize this?" Chie-Hoon spread the picture wide and turned, slowly, on the chair to let every one of them have a good look.

"It's a Tasmanian wolf," said somebody—to which there was general agreement—then a swift reshuffling of the Australian Guild to get closer.

"Good on you, mate," said Chie-Hoon. "That's exactly right! *That's* what our rexes are chaining up to! It was extinct on Earth, but that doesn't make it any the less Earth-authentic. Speaking as a member of the Australian Guild, Annie, I won't have you stabilizing the rexes. Save the Tasmanian wolf!"

With that, Chie-Hoon raised a fist, dramatically, then shouted a second time, "Save the Tasmanian wolf!"

And before I knew what was happening, pandemonium reigned. The entire Australian Guild was chanting, "Save the Tasmanian wolf!" as if their own lives depended on it, with Kelly Crafter Sangster herself leading the chant.

Twenty minutes later, they released the uninjured rex and its mother, with promises to release the other pair as soon as the joey's leg had healed, and I was being threatened with dire consequences if I didn't return Leo's courting gift to the fields within the week.

"They won't let me keep my present," I said to Leo, grinning through my complaint.

"I know," he said, grinning just as much. "But they'll let you keep your kangaroo rexes. That's what counts."

"It was a great courting gift, Leo."

"I know."

"We'll have to see about re-establishing the kangaroos at Gogol, too, before we lose the rest of the sheep there to the lambkill."

"Don't you ever think about anything but work, woman?"

"Occasionally. Call Loch Moose Lodge and book us a room for the week. I need a vacation."

He started off to do just that. I had another thought. "Leo!"

"You're not changing your mind." That was an order.

"No, I'm not changing my mind. But it occurs to me that Chris always wanted to be a member of my team, if she could be the official cook. Tell her I'm bringing her a brace of fish." It was those damned jumping fish

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I had in mind. "If she can find a way to cook them that'll make them the hot item of the season, she's on the team."

He laughed. "You've just made Chris's day."

He turned to go again, but I caught him and gave him a good long kiss, just so he wouldn't forget to book the room while he was at it. "You made my year, Leo."

Now all I had to do was think of an appropriate courting present for *him*. Which wasn't going to be easy. What do you give a guy who gives you a kangaroo rex?

I'd think of something. ●

WHEN THE LAST DAY ENDS

When the last day ends,
when the last dream fades,
when the last lovers
kiss and turn away
into the night

the last moon dims
behind the last snow
falling, falling

when the last smoke clears,
when the last wind stills,
when the last eyes blink
and stare at nothing
the last bird calls.

—M. Shayne Bell

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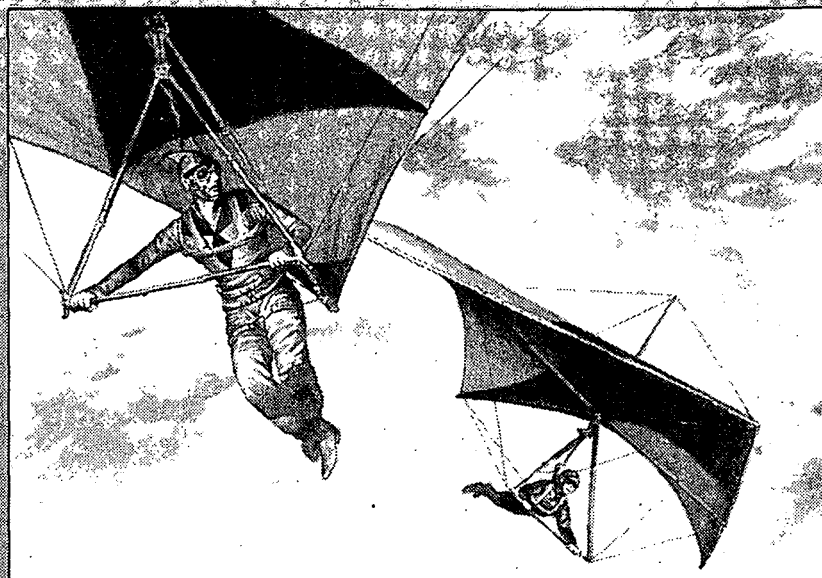

KITES

by M.F. McHugh

An electrifying pace is set for the reader in M.F. McHugh's story, "Kites." Ms. McHugh is currently at work on a novel—tentatively titled *China Mountain Zhang*—that is set in the same world as the following tale.

art: Bob Walters

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The door is flanked by two curtained windows with big flower arrangements in them, it makes the place look more like a discreet and expensive restaurant than a funeral parlor. The first person I see is Orchid—long white hair and black satin quilted jacket with, of course, a huge white silk orchid appliqued across the back. Then Cinnabar, who isn't wearing red. Cinnabar is really Cinnabar Chavez's first name, so I guess he doesn't have to prove anything, he only wears red when he flies.

Some fliers take on their flying name, like Orchid. Everybody calls her Orchid. I don't even know what her name is. But nobody calls Eleni "Jacinth" except the marks. Nobody calls me Gargoyle, they just call me Angel. But everybody calls Johnny B "Johnny B," even though we all know his name is Gregory.

Cinnabar sees me, waves me over. He's a good flier for a guy, a little tall; he's 1.55 meters but so skinny he doesn't mass over 48 kilos. Flying runs in his family, his brother was Random Chavez—bet you didn't know he even had a last name. Of course, he was killed in that big smash, Jesus, five years ago? I'm getting old. That was the year I started flying the big kites. I was there, I finished that race.

"*Pijiu*?" Cinnabar says. We give each other a hug. There's a spread, a funeral banquet, but I can't eat at funerals. Just as well, since I have to keep my weight at about thirty-nine kilos, and beer has too many calories. Orchid preens, looking strange and graceful as a macaw. I check, no cameras, and of course she's not synched. She must do it by instinct.

We don't have anything to say to each other. So we stand around the viewing room feeling guilty. The dead can feel virtuous I suppose. Dead dead dead. That's for all you people who say "passed away."

People die for different reasons; the young ones—the ones with good reflexes—die because they take risks; the older ones die because their reflexes or synapsis let them down. Not that we don't all cut up and take risks, it's just that the older you get, the less often you get in positions where you have to, or maybe you know that there's another race.

"Kirin was a nice girl," Cinnabar says.

I didn't really know the deceased all that well. I mean, she'd flown and all but she'd only been riding in the big kites a year or so, and I was out for three months because I tore a ligament in my shoulder. Besides, she was ABC, American Born Chinese, she even had citizenship in China. Opens a lot of doors. ABCs don't have to associate with *weiguoren* from Brooklyn. Especially *weiguoren* having a bad year. Funny, when I was growing up I didn't know that *weiguoren* meant foreigner, because the ABCs were the foreigners to me. I always thought it meant not-Chinese.

"Are you flying tonight?" I ask.

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"I'm going down to Florida this afternoon," Orchid says. She goes down there a lot to fly.

"You be out at Washington Square?" Cinnabar asks me.

"If Georgia can get the Siyue off the ground." Georgia's my tech.

"You're still flying a Siyue?" Orchid asks, white eyebrows arching all disdainful.

Cinnabar looks away as if he hasn't heard, to save me face. Last year Citinet dropped me and I've been flying independent. Orchid knows that. *Meiqian,* I'm a poor woman, last year's kite. Bitch. But Orchid isn't going to be dropped, no. Even if she isn't having a good year, she makes a good cover story. Pretty girl, a popular synch.

"Angel," Cinnabar says, "Jailai tonight on Guatemala Avenue, want to go back to the old neighborhood?"

"Let's see how the race goes."

Cinnabar is such a sweetheart. He comes from Brooklyn, like me. Orchid looks bored, pampered little Virginia girl.

"If you come into money," Cinnabar says, "You pay."

I laugh.

At Washington Square, Georgia and I have got the Siyue working and I lift the kite over my head, holding it so I can feel the wind in the silk. It hums, a huge insect. I'm wired into the half-awake kite and moving in sensory overlap—I have arms and wings both feeding through parallel synapsis, and if I think about which I am trying to move it's like trying to pat my head and rub my stomach at the same time. But I'm lit and my mind is chemical clear. My black silk wings are taut and light above me. I am called *Angel,* with the soft "h" sound of Brooklyn for the "g," and I am burning, waiting for the race. I stand 1.47 meters tall and weigh 39 kilos but I'm strong, probably stronger than you. My joints are like cables, the ligaments and tendons in my shoulders are all synthetic after the last surgery, strong as spider web, far stronger than steel.

If my kite holds together, there is no one who can beat me. I feel it.

I jog a few meters, and then start to run lightly. There is the faint vibration of power as the sensors signal that I've reached the threshold between drag and lift and the system trips into active, and when the power feeds through the kite the full system comes on, and I swing my legs up into the harness by habit because I don't even have a body anymore. My body *is* the kite. I feel the air on my silk, I balance on the air. The kite is more than a glider, because it needs a power source which is fueled by my own metabolism, but the original kites—hang gliders—were true gliders; a kite *does* fly. I mean, I'm not a rock. I won't just fall.

I climb in lazy circles, there's two fliers spiraling up above me, one below me. *Loushang* is Medicine, her kite patterned like a Navajo sand

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painting even from where I see it underneath. *Louxia* I can't see, they are between me and the groundlight, so all I can see is the silhouette of a Liuyue kite. I test the kite, my left shoulder aches like rheumatism. It's an old kite, it has aches and pains.

Then they are starting to form up; eighteen kites, two abreast, I am six back, on the outside. I drop into place, and we do a slow circle of the course. Eighteen triangles of bright silk. The course goes from Washington Square Park to Union Square and back, following The Swath. Over the Square the ground is a maze of lights, then suddenly the ground lights end and there's nothing below us but the undergrowth and debris of the 2059 riots. Off to my right I see the bracelet of lights where Broadway goes under The Swath—I never remember to call it Huang tunnel, it's still Morrissey to me—and then there's nothing but the floaters lighting us until we're over Union Square. Long sweeping turn over Union Square and just as we straighten up, like a long strung-out New Year's dragon made of kites, we're back over The Swath. Off to my right and slightly behind me now is midtown. I count floaters, there are five, and then we are over Washington Square Park. I catch a glimpse of the betting board but it's too small to read from up here.

I wonder briefly how many people are synched with me. I used to be self-conscious about the people who are tied in, experiencing what I experience as I fly. Now I don't think of them as separate people much—a teenage boy somewhere in Queens, maybe an old man in the Bronx. If the numbers get high enough, Citinet will sponsor me again. But why sponsor someone with last year's kite? Someone who probably won't win? When they dropped me at Citinet, they told me I was too precise a flier. I made all the rational choices, took no chances. I was too cold, no fun.

I told them no one was going to follow *me* down into The Swath, fighting to regain control of my kite, until the automatic cutoff kills the synch just nanoseconds before impact. One of them muttered that at least then I'd be doing something *interesting*.

We come back over Washington Square Park for the second time and the kites begin to pick up speed. We glide past the floater marking the start and already I'm climbing, trying to get altitude. Ten kites are in front of me and I sideslip slightly inside, cutting off Medicine, flying to my left. She's forced to go underneath me, ends up flying *xialou*, my shadow underneath except that my kite is black silk and hers is patterned in red, black, white, and blue. I see Cinnabar ahead, flying third—a scarlet kite with edges that bleed into cinnamon.

And we are over The Swath. I dive. Not hard, just enough to gain speed. A black kite disappears over The Swath, there is only the silver of the lights reflecting like water on my silk. I hang there underneath Kim (whose work name is Polaris but who I have always called Kim.)

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The dive has put merely the lightest of strain on my frame and the ache in my shoulder is no worse. Still, I wait, to see where everyone is when we flash out over Union Square. I settle in, working steadily. I'm not winded, I feel good. I drink air out of my facemask.

Out over the lights of Union Square.

I am somewhere around fifth, we aren't in neat rows anymore. I feel strong, I've got my pace. I look for Cinnabar. He has dropped back, but he is high, high above me, *shanglou*. When my kite was new, I rode up there, *shanglou*. We are a spume of color, a momentary iridescence over Union Square, and then we are back over The Swath. I am climbing, forcing myself up. I feel rather than see someone swoop underneath me. Not Cinnabar, he's waiting. I push a bit, counting under my breath as I pass floaters. One, two, three, four, five, and we are out in the lights again. I have held on to fifth, and am even with most of the pack, but Cinnabar is above me, and Riptide has taken low lead. She was the swoop I felt. Kim is slightly in front of me, and in the light, she dives a bit and then rises like a sailfish, sprinting forward. She arcs up and starts to fall into acceleration, but a blue kite flown by some rookie whose name I don't remember neatly sideslips across her trajectory, and she must spill air to avoid. And then we are over the darkness for the second and final circuit. Again I climb. One, two, three, four, five, and we are over Union Square. I am higher than Kim and Riptide, but Cinnabar is somewhere higher above me, so I continue to climb. Something, some sense, tells me just as we are going into the dark that he is diving, and I dive, too. A kite has to come in at least two hundred meters above the ground, that's for safety. I am ahead of Cinnabar, I don't know how far. Everyone is diving through the dark, ahead of me I sense the rookie, she is in my arc. I let my wings catch lift just for a second, feeling the strain, coming just over the top of her, and for a moment I'm afraid I've cut it too close.

But I'm over her, and I feel her lose it for a second, brake, spill air, startled and trying to avoid a collision that would have happened before she had time to react. The wind is so cold across my wings. I'm taking great gulps of air. My shoulder is aching.

Something moves faster, over me, Cinnabar, and I dive deeper, but the frame of my kite begins to shudder and I'm afraid to trust it. I ease up on the dive, trying to power-sprint forward, but my shoulder twinges and the kite shudders and is suddenly clumsy. Something has given in the left side of the kite. Frantic, I spill air, lose speed and altitude as wings flash around me, over me, under me, but the kite is under control. I come into the light, crippled, losing altitude. The others flash across the finish. By the time I get to the finish, I'm at 150 meters, too low. Cinnabar Chavez is taking his victory lap as I touch down, running, feeling the strain in my knees of trying to slow the broken kite, then walking.

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Georgia, tall and heavy-hipped, my tech, takes the kite, lifts it off my shoulders. She doesn't say anything. I don't say anything. What's to say?

I feel heavy, dirt solid. I take off my facemask and gulp air. God, I'm tired.

Cinnabar is flushed with winning, he's been having a so-so year, he's been hungry for a win. But everybody is always hungry for a win. He comes and finds me where Georgia and I are packing up my broken kite. It's nice of him to think of me. He's a little embarrassed to be standing there while we finish crating it, it takes a long time because part of the frame is bent and it won't fit.

I compliment him on his win and he says "*Nalinali,*" making a don't-talk-about-it motion with his hand, looking away across the park. But he's wound up. "Come meet me, by my crew," he says, too tense to wait, and why should he when there are people waiting for him?

So I go to find him, and a bunch of us go out to a place on La Guardia where we can drink and make a lot of noise. It's called Commemorative, and fliers hang out there. Cinnabar's picked up two guys; a blond and an ABC, both clearly bent. So's Cinnabar. They aren't fliers, of course. Cinnabar has the hots for the blond, whose name is Peter. He isn't tall, not for, you know, a non-flier, I'm not good at heights, maybe 1.7? And not heavy. But next to him Cinnabar looks like nothing but bone and hair. He's pretty, too. And scrawny Cinnabar is not pretty.

They're talking about going to see some jailai, but I figure they don't need me along, so I say I'm tired and have to get up tomorrow to look at the kite. The ABC says he's tired, too, which surprises me.

"How are you getting home?" he asks me. It's the first time he's spoken to me all night, but then Cinnabar and the blond have been doing all the talking.

What's he think, I'm going home by limo? "Subway," I say.

"I'll walk with you," he offers.

There are the usual protestations, the don't gos and if you musts. Then I find myself going down the stairs and out onto the street with this gay ABC in his mirrors and his sharkskin jacket. ABCs all act like their faces are made out of ice. We walk west. I'm not sure of his name, sounded like the blond kept calling him Rafe or something, so I ask and he says, "Zhang," real flat.

Fuck it, I think, I didn't ask you to take a walk.

We cross Sixth Avenue, and then all of a sudden he says, "I'm sorry I wasn't synched with you tonight."

I'm a little caught off, so I say, "Were you synched with Cinnabar?"

He shakes his head. "Israel."

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Israel? Who the hell is Israel? It must be the rookie. "She'll be okay," I say, "once she has some experience." The kind of stuff one says.

"She was okay until you dusted her," he says.

Neither of us says anything more until we're in the lighted subway. Then to be polite I ask, "What do you do?"

"I'm a tech engineer," he says, which is hard to imagine because he doesn't look or talk like the kind of person who spends his days on construction sites, if you know what I mean. He takes off his mirrored shades and rubs his eyes, adding, "But I'm unemployed," then puts them on.

I mumble something about being sorry to hear it. He's chilly and distant but he keeps talking to me. I can't imagine him wanting me to invite him home, and I sure as hell don't want to anyway. So I look at the track.

Down the track I see the lights of the train.

"When the kite went," he says, "did you think about that *Zhongguo ren,* Kirin?"

The flier that just died. That's why he wanted to be synched to me. "No," I say, "I didn't think about anything but getting it under control. You don't have much time to think. Did you ever fly a kite?" As if I had to ask.

"No," he says.

"It's not a cerebral activity," I say.

The train comes in fast and then cushions to a stop. We get on. He doesn't say anything else except "Bye," when he transfers for Brooklyn.

I always forget that half of the people who watch us fly are waiting to see us die.

I *was* thinking, or rather, I had something in the back of my head, when the kite shuddered. I was thinking of my first year flying the big kites. I was flying in the New York City Flight, it was only my third or fourth big race and it was the biggest race I had ever been in. I was a rookie, the field was huge—twenty-six fliers. I didn't have a chance. And I had a crush on Random Chavez. Five fliers were killed in that race.

That was the first time I ever felt afraid to die. When the kite shudders, whenever something goes wrong and there's that instant of having no control, I'm always back at that race.

I ride the subway home to Brooklyn. It's not far from the subway to my building, but I'm glad to get to the door. Safe in the entry, safer in the elevator. I've been living here for two years, and the building knows me. I have an affinity for machines, call me superstitious but I think it comes of spending some of my waking hours as a kind of cyborg. I think my building likes me. I get in the apartment and the lights come on dim,

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I get myself something icy and bitter to drink and throw on my rec of that race. The chair hugs me, and I prop my feet up and the apartment darkens. I don't synch in with anyone, so it's like watching it from a floater keeping pace with the race. Like being God. Or maybe God is synched in to everyone. Same thing, though, total objectivity. I'm back in the thick of the pack, flying about ninth. Jacinth has just snapped a connection, and her kite falls behind, then clear, then disappears off the screen. She dropped out just before anything happened.

Fox is in seventh, Random Chavez is in fifteenth; Fox dolphins to rise over Watchmaker and just as she begins the swoop over him she slips it—looks away, loses her concentration, who knows. Anyway, she clips Watchmaker and he waffles, would have pulled out of it maybe but he loses too much speed, and Malachite, in front of me, tries to pull his kite over and they collide, I hear the rip of silk, even though flying is really too noisy to hear anything. I don't remember anything after that, but in the tape I slip sideways, inside, and shoot past them. The pack parts around them but Random is boxed, so he drops nose-first into a steep vertical dive deep into a crack between fliers and is gone underneath all of us, streaking, until he tries to pull up. If his kite had been braced the way they are now he'd have made it, but that's five years ago, and the silk shears under the stress, and he tumbles. And he was dead. And Fox, Malachite, Hot Rocks, and Saffron were dead, and Watchmaker never flew again. And Angel finished seventh.

I run it through a second time, in synch with Random Chavez. I just want to feel the plunge when he saw no way through ahead of him, but being in synch is really not the same as being there. I don't see the space he knew was there, feel only the amusement park sensation of drop, the shoot and cut out when the kite starts to tumble.

The lights start to come up, but I want it dim. I think about my kite, and where I'm going to get money to fix it. Mr. Melman of Melman-Guoxin Pipe is one of my sponsors, I'll go to him, sign a note. Oh damn, I'm so deep in debt already. But it's just a frame and silk, everything else would be all right. And I have silk.

In Chinese, silk is *si,* first tone. Four is *si,* second tone—as in Siyue, April (fourth month). Death is *si,* third tone. Four is a bad luck number for Chinese. But I'm from Brooklyn.

My synch numbers pick up for the next race, but it's always like that after a crack-up. People like that ABC in Commemorative. I fly a careful race, come in fourth, just out of money. Afterwards I think that if I'd flown a more spectacular race—worried less about winning and more about how it synched—I could have picked up my numbers. But how can I go out and fly without planning to win?

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It's two weeks before I hit money, and that's only second. Pays rent for Georgia and me. Nights I'm out with Cinnabar. He's been hitting, and his synch numbers are way up, with the requisite loss of privacy. He needs somebody to go places with, he surely can't pick up some bent groupie if a synch crew is likely to come out of the walls and snatch a shot or an impression.

Cinnabar and I share a fondness for kites and a reverence for his dead brother. Late at night, clear out to the vacuum, we talk about how wonderful a flyer he was, with that combination of seriousness and hyperbole the sober can't abide.

We go out dancing the night before the New Haven Flight, Cinnabar in his brother's red sharkskin jacket—so what if it's five years out of date—and me in a black dress cut so low in back you can see the copper bruise of the synapsis junction in the base of my spine. We go to someplace way downtown in the area they're reclaiming, you know the place, where you have to fit the mix to get in. The building likes us, I told you I have an affinity for buildings, because we just saunter past all the people it won't let in and whoosh, the doors open. Dancing with Cinnabar is nice, on the sultry numbers I don't find myself regarding the middle of his chest and on the fast numbers he isn't as stiff as most straights. Or maybe it's because he's a flyer.

We dance a lot, and then get synched, I see the crew from the vid. Some woman from the vid drags us in back for an interview with Cinnabar, and we sit in the kitchen. Cinnabar's soaked with sweat, with his hair all stuck to his face, and I can feel sweat trickling down my back. She asks all the silly questions about racing and if he expects his streak to continue. He just shrugs. It always amazes me that they ask that, what do they expect people to do, say yes?

She asks how he got from Brooklyn to flying kites, and he tells her Random was his older brother. I tell her that the jacket is Random's, I figure it will make good media. The kitchen is environmented, and it's *cold.* Cinnabar puts the jacket around my shoulders and sits with his arm around my waist. I can feel his fingers on my ribs tapping nervously. She asks us if we're ready for the New Haven tomorrow and says she notices we aren't drinking. I tell her it's too many calories. I don't tell her we're iced to the gills (no calories in chemicals.) But we're iced enough that we aren't really watching what we're doing.

She asks Cinnabar if he feels he has a good chance for the New Haven, and he makes like to spit over his shoulder, just like they do at home to ward off bad luck, then he says, "Gargoyle's going to beat me."

We all laugh.

Citinet calls me after the synch is on vid next evening, but I'm already out at the park, patching my old Siyue. I'm hoping the vid exposure will

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raise my synch numbers, but I'm thinking about my kite, not my publicity. I don't even see the vid until later, and in it we look like a couple of seventeen-year-olds cuddling, which hooks all the romantics, and there's that red jacket going from owner to owner to catch all the disaster addicts. Just shows nobody cares about how you race so much as what they think about your life.

There are bunches of people around my pit watching Georgia and me work, and another synch crew shows up. They want to know what it feels like to be racing against my boyfriend and how serious Cinnabar and I are. I say a race is a race and shrug.

"Do you think Cinnabar is right when he says you're going to beat him?"

I stand up and face the synch crew, put my hands on my hips. "Well, I'm going to try," I say, "but I'm flying a Siyue, and he's flying a Liuyue."

"What's the difference?"

"His is a newer kite," I say, "Now I gotta get ready for a race, *sí*?"

They don't stop asking me questions but I stop answering. The pick-up chirps, and I leave Georgia testing systems.

"Angel," Cinnabar says, "*Está loco aquí.*"

"*Aquí tambien, amigo.* I don't know how I can get anything done." It's so noisy I have to plug one ear with my finger. "We did good, huh?"

"No shit." He laughs. "Synch numbers are going to be great. Got an idea, going to send you the jacket, okay? Make a big fuss. Then, when you fly in that crate tonight, you make it look good, okay? Maybe somebody will pick you up and you can fly a real kite."

"Go to hell, my Siyue is a real kite."

"You like antiques."

"You're doing me a great favor," I say to him.

"Favor hell, the bigger this is, the higher my numbers, *comprende*?"

"Okay," I say.

Fifteen minutes later, as I'm putting on my face mask and getting ready to take the kite out, one of Cinnabar's crew arrives carrying the red sharkskin jacket. I make a big show of staring at it, then put it on slowly. Then I jog the Siyue out.

I'm out early, I need the time to remember I'm flying a race. It's cold up there, it feels good. It's empty, I take a lonely lap out across The Swath and Union Square. For the first time since I got out to the Park I get to think about the race.

I fall into line when I get back out over Washington Square, take one lazy lap with everyone. I'm back at eighth, Cinnabar is second. He'll go *shanglou* and so will Orchid. I haven't a chance against them if I fly their race, not in a Siyue. We flash over Washington Square Park. I climb a bit, but when we go over The Swath I put my kite into a long

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flat drive, pumping forward. It's not an all-out sprint, but I'm pushing faster than my usual pace. I ride far out, all the way down till I'm close to the two hundred meter altitude limit, and when we flash over Union Square I'm low and way out in front. Everybody is still jockeying for *shanglou*, which is ridiculous, because Cinnabar is going to be the best power diver, at forty-eight kilos he's got mass on his side. I'm using my light weight—damn few fliers lighter than thirty-nine kilos—and sprinting. I don't expect anyone to dive until we're over The Swath, but Israel breaks and is diving after me. As we go into darkness, the pack breaks above me.

Is that ABC snyched with me tonight?

In the darkness. I climb a bit, maybe twenty-five meters. Kites are diving in the dark, and when we flash over Washington Square the second time, I'm third, and the field is a disaster. People are strung out *shanglou* to *xialou* and Orchid is first. Her kite is pearlized silver. She's in trouble because I know I can out-power her. I'm above her, she's down around bottoming out.

We go back into the dark. I'm pushing, I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. But I've flown this goddamn race my way. I'm still third when we come out over Union Square, but three people dive in front of me, including Cinnabar. I dive into the middle, still not as low as Orchid. She tries to dolphin up and rises into Medicine. We go into darkness.

It's the worst point of the race under the best of circumstances, because one is half-blind and acclimating, and the next floater is too far to see and I don't know what the hell is going on, but I know things are a mess. I feel someone over me, and Medicine and Orchid have to be tangled in front of me. The disaster lights go on and I have just time to see Orchid's kite waffle into Cinnabar and see the silk shred away from the left front strut. Polaris is above me, coming down outside. Israel is coming fast inside me. I take the space in front of me, nose first, and start a screaming, too deep dive.

I know I'm below two hundred meters, but I'm more worried about pulling the kite out. My bones/frame are screaming with strain and the cross strut breaks away. I drop out of the harness to provide drag, and come into Washington Square too low, too fast. At twenty meters I try to throw the nose up, no longer trying to save the frame and the silk, and the frame distorts as easily as an umbrella turns inside-out in a high wind. *But the silk holds*, like a slack sail taking up air. I try to land on my feet, the ground makes my foot skip off it, I can't get far enough in front of the kite, the balls of my feet keep skipping off the pavement as I try to run, I tumble, and the ground comes up hard . . .

I come to when they're cutting the harness off. They cut off the shark-

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skin jacket, too, because I've dislocated my left shoulder. "What happened?" I keep saying, "what happened?"

"An accident," Georgia says, "you're okay, honey."

They've given me something, because I'm way out to the vacuum, and I can't think of the questions I want to ask, so I keep saying, "What happened?"

"Orchid got in. Almost everybody's in," Georgia says.

"Who's not in?"

"Cinnabar," she says, "he went down in The Swath."

Well, of course, you probably remember everything else, since it was all over the media. How Cinnabar Chavez broke his spine. That they did surgery, and that it was a while before they were sure he would live.

He was in bad shape for a long time but he's okay now. He lives in Brooklyn with his lover, I still see him a lot. He doesn't fly anymore. Surgery is wonderful, so is therapy, and he's still a sweet dancer, but he couldn't trust his reflexes in a race. He has a job as a consultant for Cuo, the company that makes the big kites, and he does commentary for one of the big vid organizations. His income is steady these days.

Mine is pretty good these days, too. I fly a big black and red kite for Citinet; a Chiyue, the new one. My synch numbers are in the 50s, and my picture's on the front of *Passion* next month. I'm wearing the red sharkskin jacket—I had it fixed—and the article is titled "Gargoyle's an Angel!" which is kind of cute.

I fly better these days. Cinnabar bitches about it, he says I'm too far out in front of myself. Sometimes when he says that, I think of bringing that Siyue in and trying to get in front of it to stop it. But that's what the people want, right?

Besides, I can't say it to him, but I'd rather be dead than not able to fly. ●

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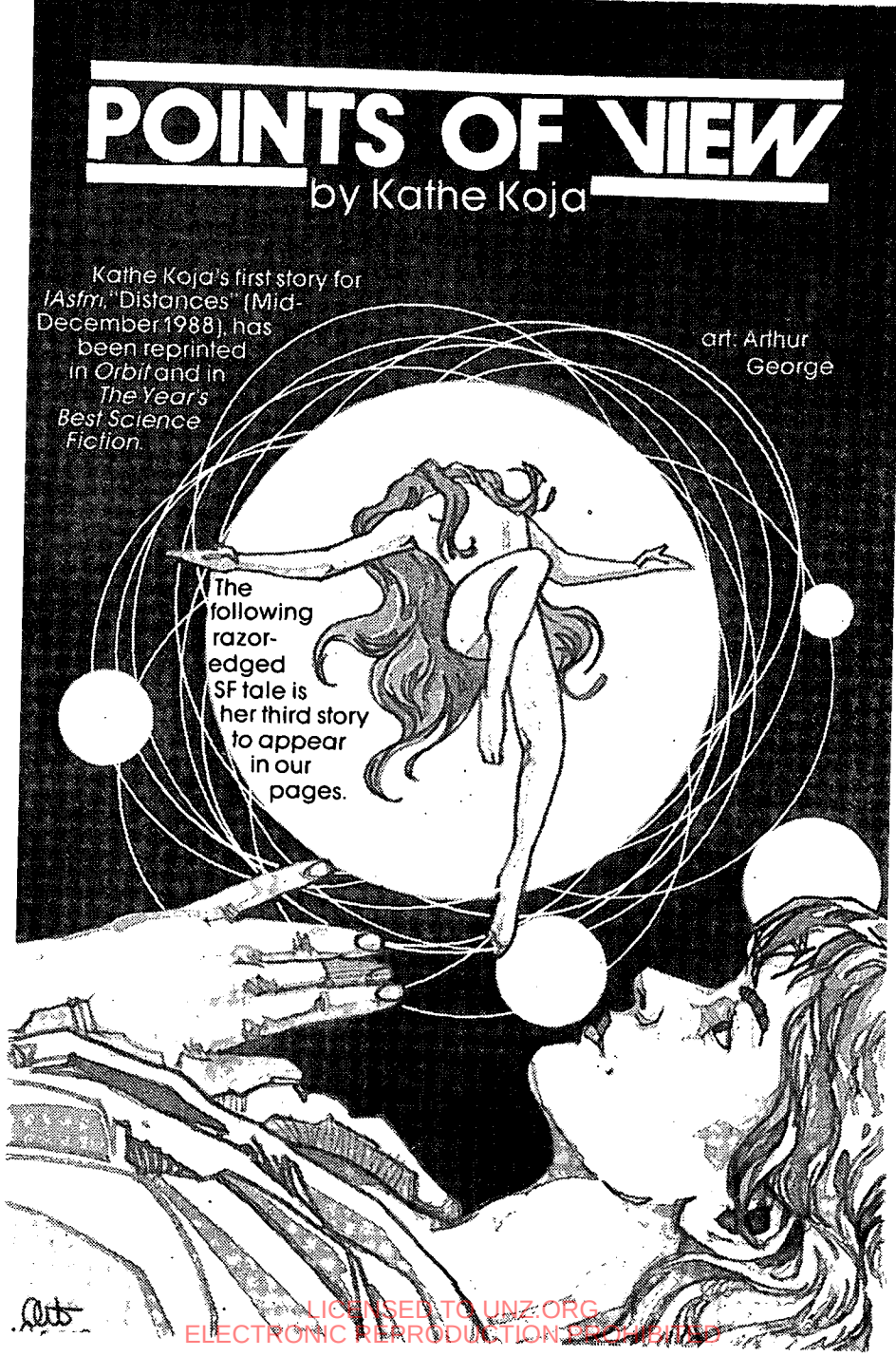
POINTS OF VIEW

by Kathe Koja

Kathe Koja's first story for *IAsfm*, "Distances" (Mid-December 1988), has been reprinted in *Orbit* and in *The Year's Best Science Fiction*.

art: Arthur George

The following razor-edged SF tale is her third story to appear in our pages.



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Black slat blinds; the flavor of blood.

Afternoon, Robin stretched beside her, black T-shirt and bare ass, fast asleep or faking. Sophy rubbed a finger in the pain, found a smear, Rorschach of blood on the black-and-gold quilt: a queen on a chessboard, a donkey, a fly, mere spoor of last night's rough fuck? Let the viewer decide. Like Robin's video drawings. She rolled to rise from the fat-pillowed futon and Robin stirred, angel's face annoyed, then burrowed deeper into dream. Of whom? Not me, Sophy thought. Hard splash of Stoly into half-full chrome water glass, alcohol and flat tapwater taste; and the iron of new blood. Into the bathroom, and she took the glass with her.

Under heartless fluorescents, a catalog of small bad surprises: ripped lip, yeah, and bruise like a flower, dark iris on the flesh beneath. On the investigating hand two nails broken, one torn almost free. Funny it didn't hurt more. Mouthful of vodka, insert sore finger and suck: purify, if not anesthetize. How had she come to be hurt, these ways? Drunk? Not so, or at least she didn't think so.

Back on the futon, nudging his weight, feeling with a feeling too much like gratitude the warmth of his long legs, their careless stretch like a dancer's, the smell of him all over the quilt, the pillows, on her fingers as she slowly stroked the seam of his bony jaw. Why was there no odor of *her* there? Was she simply too close to it, like the pulse of her blood and as unnoticed, or did the superior vitality of Robin's scent override her own? Superior vitality—that was Robin, his complaints of her tiredness, she was always tired lately. "Ask Hans Peter for something," he'd suggested, and Sophy had shaken her head, positively no, picturing Hans Peter and his constant, more than slightly maniacal grinning: a jack o'lantern burning silent nuclear light.

Hans Peter was a drug designer, but more importantly he was a patron, *the* patron, of Robin's art. Video drawing was not new—Brody pencil self-animated sketches mated to holocam footage—but Robin was: with the twisted innovation of genius he had, according to Hans Peter at least, stood the medium on its ear with his first exhibited drawing, "Doctors Feed the Hungry Dead Breakfast." It was slowly becoming a cult favorite, and its cold cerebral humor had instantly attracted Hans Peter's attention. Sophy felt she had never really understood it; where others saw powerful satire, a mocking convolution of conventional morals, she saw only sorrow and waste; she had never told Robin but he knew, and mocked her, too. "Tightassed Sophy," with that twist, that warmthless smile that was nonetheless so beautiful that when he called her, after the showing, she came, sad little leather bag of belongings, last week's haircut. He pulled her into bed by her breasts. She had been there, more or less, ever since.

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Looking at him now, fallen angel, still she must smile, kept the smile as his eyes opened, unfathomed blue. He yawned, scratched his chest, asked her the time and when she gave it closed his eyes again; she might have been an appliance. But then eyes still shut he reached for her, commanding arm crooked round her neck, and with his other hand turned her face so he might kiss her, full and hard, on her aching mouth. She winced; she smiled. They slept again.

Another party, and Sophy careful to limit her drinks, as carefully watching her words, her smiles, the way she held herself, the way she talked or didn't. It was not so much a party as a business meeting, according to Robin, and she must get to know these people, know and remember them: their styles, their sponsors, their drug preferences and sexual fads. She tried, oh God she tried, but there were so many, and while different they were all, somehow, so terribly the same; she called someone named Allen Alice and half the room laughed, the other half sighed, and Robin stared at her like a stranger. She found at last a corner, sat, half a smile pinned to her face, silent until two people—"Kim" and "Tilman," sex obscure—approached her, made curious conversation, mostly with each other but the odd remark to her, and finally Tilman squealed, "I knew I knew you, you're the raincoat girl!" and Kim laughed, turned Sophy's unresisting chin like a parody of an oldtime director, wotta profile. Sophy smiled, bewildered, and Tilman started asking questions, how *about* that thing, the dancing, when he hit you didn't it *hurt?* "Looks like it did," touching her face, the bruise she had tried to conceal.

Then Robin, full lips compressed and grim, tight smile to Kim and Tilman as he dragged Sophy off and away, throwing her faux leather windbreaker at her, hustling her out the door with tiny pushes. "What were they talking about, I don't know what they were talking about," and Robin refusing to even look at her: "Don't talk to me, I have nothing whatever to say to you. Nothing." And he didn't. For two days.

She woke, a morning, to Robin laughing in the other room, the immaculate drawl of Hans Peter in reply, and then laughter again, from both. Hiss and click of the outer door locking, and Robin stood smiling at her from the bedroom doorway.

"A commission," too happy not to share it. "Hans Peter's putting up all the credit. A full-length drawing!" radiant as only Robin could be radiant, reaching to take her in a victory embrace. Kisses, her healed mouth hot under his, the pillows of the futon warm as a womb.

Afterwards he was all business, no time to discuss it with her now, he had calls to make, work to do, he needed absolute peace. She left him at his console, sun through the black blinds a deep dazzle on his hair, on the long matte slab: built-in keyboard, holo projector with unmarked

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keys and function board, so black market-new it still bore the gummy traces of peeled factory stickers. A discreet pile of printout was half-covered by a spill of magazines, faxes, newsprint, pages torn from all three, and as she carefully closed the door, his hand was sorting, eyelessly hunting the mess while the other sketched in the air, long steel glitter of the platinum Brody pencil. He was working, and she was happy.

On the kitchen counter, white and bare as any surgery, she found a blot of bubblepack, slim green triangles, green like the forest at night, like stained glass in a convent: a taste from Hans Peter. With a narrow frown she pushed them aside, into the counter's corner, then scrubbed her hands together as if they had been stained.

Bad headache.

The worst, raw shiver of pain and an ache twinned between her thighs, Robin's voice fussy and faraway: "Take this, Sophy," closing her hand around a cup, paper cup, her grip slow and defenseless. What is it? she wanted to say or maybe did, for Robin's answer: "I don't have *time* for this, I'm working. Just take it." Mouthing up a pill, its taste incongruous and sweet, as if it were sugarcoated. She swallowed the water, the merest motion of her body bringing new bright throbbing and she closed her eyes, lying absolutely still, and after a while heard or seemed to hear the sound of rain, no, a shower, water hitting the shower curtain, a loud staticky buzz, a sound familiar, but no time to sort impressions because now it was dark and she was glad.

"Can I see it?"

"Not yet," expansive, "not while it's in progress." Very carefully she asked if Hans Peter—and Robin laughed, reached over to tousle her hair. "Man's got a right to see what he's paying for. But don't worry, you'll be there for the premiere."

Shower-rain, water on plastic; the feel of fugue, subtle shift of bones resettling, the dance of muscles, eyesight gone low-resolution, consciousness eroded line by inexorable line, and Robin's face above her, pinking with delight, lips moving ("Bye-bye"), the noise of the water as loud in her ears as the roar of a tunneled train.

"Wake up."

Sophy stirred, legs in slow canter beneath the quilt, breasts bare and cold. "What?" as she tried to sit up, opened her eyes to Hans Peter in black wraparound shades and a luminous grin. Sophy jerked the quilt high; she saw her figure's motion, elongated by distortion, in the insect lenses of his eyes.

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"Sorry if I scared you. Robin asked me to look in on you."

There was a pain in the back of her neck, like exercising too hard, the muscles sore and taut and hot. "Well, you looked. Now you can go."

"*Hey.*" Robin's face, staring in the doorway, flushed, eyes too bright. "You don't talk that way to a man like Hans Peter, *Sophy*. Hans Peter is my *friend, Sophy*." He curled an arm around Hans Peter's bony shoulders, squeezed. Hans Peter giggled, a soft sound like trickling water. "If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't *have* a career. Or Pauline."

A thing in her chest, like a punch: Pauline Pauline, lightspeed search backward through memory, names, faces at parties. "Who's Pauline?"

Incredibly, they both laughed, tandem sound. They might have been twins. Or actors.

"You want to know who Pauline is? I'll *show* you who Pauline is," and Robin reached for her, hands very hot, a bubble of sweat on his upper lip. His pupils were enormous. He dragged her off the futon, into the other room, her hands crossed futilely over her breasts and his breathing uneven and hard; smiling, a sweet smile, Hans Peter handed her a T-shirt, watched as she put it on. Turned to Robin, the faintest of frowns disturbing his luminescence: "Is this wise?" Robin, one-finger programming, fiddling with the playback, did not answer, and Hans Peter shrugged, took a seat at the opposite end of the room, Robin's favorite Myrtle chair; he winked at Sophy, who turned instantly away.

"Watch this," and Robin beside her, glittering, stern, a jailer.

Her own face, projected to three times its size.

"*What—*"

"Shut up, *Sophy*. Just watch."

The postures. The movements. Her. And nothing like her, *nothing*. A feeling in her throat like something crawling, the muscles in slow convulsion—not me, *not me*. Not up there, her smile, long and considering, a predator's elegant grin—no way hers but it *was:* no wizardly effect, no double, no clone even could be that eerily perfect; there, and *there,* the way she sometimes wiped the corner of one eye, an almost perfunctory habit, like nailbiting. . . . The woman vaulted now through an elaborate freestyle combat dance, utterly conscious of her body and its energies in a way Sophy, the clumsy, never was. Robin beside her, laughing silently; sweat ran down her sides, her armpits were soaked and sour.

The dance gone battle, and now before her an assailant in bull's mask and horns, brandishing some stick or stave, and the woman waited, feinted, there! a kick and another, fierce fluidity, ballet streetfighter, kicked again and bubbles burst and rose, blood bubbles then cartoon heat-bubbles as the woman grinned again, fullface, unSophy, swaggering through the shimmer to the camera's eye to confront it with her own, a

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rushing closeup that devoured all but that cryptic commando stare deep into the viewer's own; fade to gone.

Robin snapped the remote, tossed it into the air like a gleeful child.

"That's Pauline," he said.

"I said I was sorry!"

Sophy, head thick from hours of tears, rubbed a finger at her eye (then abruptly stopped). Leaden: "*Sorry.* You didn't tell me, you didn't even ask what I—" A long shiver poured down her skin, goosebumps sharp as scrapes though she was bundled to the throat in the futon quilt, mummied in a robe beneath. Robin half-lay, half-sat beside her, one pillow crosswise on his lap, fretfully kneading the tasseled ends.

"I knew you would never—I knew you would say no. You *know* you would have," and she nodded furiously, of *course* she would have said no, she would never have consented to something so monstrous. "It's just a mild dose, Soph, it brings on flip state but it doesn't hurt you. Hans Peter says—"

"Hans Peter! He's getting a free guinea pig, he'll say anything!"

"All I meant," with calm but pained dignity, "was that he *designed* the fucking thing, he *knows* what it can do."

"He knows. Right." She blew her nose, tissue wet and shredding; too many words to speak, too dreadful the terms. Flip state, *shit,* it was multiple personality, not a drug reaction but a whole new person, even Robin had admitted it, almost. She could not say the words aloud. Madness. A door opened that should never have been discovered, the unexpected stranger waiting, waiting for some pillpushing bastard like Hans Peter to slip off the lock. And Robin, don't forget Robin, propped in his director's chair, shiny pencil swift in the air like some trained bird of prey. The remarks at the party, Kim and Tilman and "the raincoat girl," how often had this happened, how many times? Who had seen her when she was *not?* Funny, it must be, to watch—

Sophy began to cry, again, slowly, monotonously. Robin flung down the pillow, sat up hingebacked and burst without preamble into loud baby tears.

"It's *not* bad," weeping, body swayed ever so slightly her way, "it's just flip state, that's *all.*" I only gave you cancer. "Do you think I would let him hurt you? Do you think I would let *anybody* hurt you?" His whole chest trembled, avalanche of feeling, he was certainly a better actor than anyone in his drawings. With one notable exception. "Oh, Sophy," peering from between palms slick with mucus and tears, "I *love* you."

Her own tears cooling on her cheeks, she felt her hands rise, brainless puppets, to stroke his hair, caress the sweet wet planes of his skin, and

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as she did, watched her fingers, their movements, thinking, Flip state. And: Pauline.

Hans Peter's apartment, half a block of it at a block thousands of dollars better than the one she shared with Robin, and Sophy at the gate, a bored-sounding doorbot announcing her presence. Faint chiming sounds, Hans Peter's suppressed monitor smile, and Sophy's forehead hot as she stepped through gun-colored doors and into silence, the pink wash of lasers, fired light checking her one last time before the sanctum sanctorum. And Hans Peter, sipping the Polish brandy he affected, greeting her at the last door.

"Pardon the precautions," he said as she stepped silently past, "but in this life it pays to be cautious."

"Oh yeah? Is that why you let Robin fuck me up?"

Harsh, an angry bravado she did not really feel; what she felt was sick, and tired. Sick mostly. But there was no getting truth from Robin, and she had to have it, so she had to have it here.

" 'Fucked up'?" raising his eyebrows to make the quotes. "It's flip state, Sophy, and please, don't be bitter: it's a quality, an *ability,* that many people would like to share. Access to another part of your personality—your id, perhaps, or that tantalizing superego, or even just a construct of your own secret devising—make no mistake, Sophy, this is no pharmaceutical trick, this is *you.* A different Sophy, but Sophy all the same."

"That wasn't me up there."

"Oh, but it *was.*" Enjoying himself, Sophy thought. "It's a part of you that goes, say, unaccessed in your daily life. The drug is a doorway, but the one who walks through—Sophy, Sophy, Sophy. Though *he* calls her Pauline." He sat on a sofa pink as a mouth, raised his glass, to her? Above his head a Japanese print, black and blue and shockingly ugly, a deliberate fart of bad taste in the suffocating couth of the room. "Enjoy it. It's making a kind of star of you, did you know that? Of brighter magnitude, maybe, than Robin, in that incestuous little garret colony scene he's trying so hard to crack. Though most of them have all the discriminating taste of a dog in a garbage can. So relax, have some fun with it. You've got nothing to worry about; my results are almost wholly positive. There *is* an addictive factor, but then the best things in life usually are."

It took a minute, even, to swallow. "What do you mean, addictive? What—"

A shrug, coathanger shoulders, not quite half a smile. "Entirely unavoidable. Well, not *entirely,* but it won't bother you a bit, you can eat it by the gramweight, nothing more than perhaps a headache the next morning. If you stop outright, though, *then* you may have a bit of—"

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The door didn't try to stop her, nor Hans Peter, though the doorbot gave a glitched whinny as Sophy kicked past it, long scissor-stride and a clenched feeling in her throat, in the back of her neck, like fear but blacker, like rage but shot with yellow, long streaks like painful veins. No cab would pick her up so she walked the whole wild-eyed way, waiting, just waiting, just to get home.

Robin was gone: relief, disappointment. She poured mash whiskey, hands shaking, drinking from the bathroom water glass, its lip scummed with old toothpaste, the taste a warring mixture in her mouth. She stripped, turned on the shower, but the static-sound of the spray on the curtain repulsed her, drove her back into the other room to sit, more mash whiskey, temples humming, hunched into Robin's heavy midnight blue robe; even in her fury his scent calmed her, numbed the sharpest edges of her fear. The dead air of the room, the flat face of the monitor, gray as a brain and more gray and with one fist she pounded the remote to ON, whatever was in the box just *play* it.

Pauline.

This time, a different show.

Pauline naked, arched saunter, hair in elaborate braids shot through with long strands of neon thread, the same thread circling ankle, wrist, waist. Darkness, soft blur of neon movement through a space, familiar—God my God that's *here*—and climbing onto the futon to the body rising to greet her, as beautifully naked, full lips in welcoming pout: Robin. All the breath left Sophy's lungs.

In silence Robin knelt, with sparkling teeth undid the thread at her wrist, lips gleaming gaudy electric blue then purest white as he did the next, the one at her waist, pausing to lick the skin there with a tenderness so alien it hit Sophy like a slap. Pauline, hair blinking, on-off code of some bizarre devising, raised one long leg to bring the ankle to his lips so he might bite free the pink burn of light. She slipped down like water to lie beneath him, arms-propped and motionless above her, on his face a dreamy radiant gravity Sophy had never seen. He began to move, exquisitely, avid for her pleasure, slow thrusts like he never did, *never,* each calling forth from her a whisper, a wild hiss, a long sussuration as he slowed and stopped and bent his perfect head to blow a cool stream of air over her body, back and forth across her skin, her sweaty flesh

and Sophy's mouth clenched

and Pauline's eyes half-open

and Robin's rhythm rising, gaining, his hands grabbing hard at the futon

and Sophy leaning forward

and Pauline's cry, half-groan into his open mouth, "Oh *God*" as he pressed himself at last down upon her

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and Sophy's shriek, her glass blowing through the air, the brown liquor floating in an eerie arc through the bodies now panting softly in rest, the smash of glass incongruous in the silence of the simulated world.

Fading to faraway charcoal, pinkish-black, and Robin's eyes, of course, the last to close, one final smug blink for the camera and then marching across the drifting holo-smoke the double-bars symbol for encryption engaged, Master Use Only, the worst of all somehow because it meant that this was made not to sell, not for money, just for Robin.

True darkness, twilight in the real world, and the sudden glow of the tape beginning again, he had set it for infinite repeat, making sure she must see it, oh the *bastard,* and she hammered at the remote, blackness again, ripped off his robe like it leeched at her flesh, dressed, first clothes she found, left. Mash whiskey in hand.

It took a while to find him, but he had only so many exits and she was in a determined mood, oh my, he wouldn't recognize her. And in fact he didn't, at first, not connecting this weaving steamed twisty walk, hair skewed, breath sour, with Sophy, and when he did—she saw it, the recognition flowing across his face like water, like blood—he flushed, too affronted to be truly angry, no, that would come later, it usually did. Unless he had her doppelganger, her double, penciled in his bed for tonight. *My* bed, too. Fucking me in my bed. In my *body.* Was she saying these things out loud? People were certainly staring.

It was a silent dance party, everyone in earbuds to one central tune or several, somebody's mix on the box tonight, eerie, the twitchings and flexings spastic, surreal, more autism than art. More and more were stopping, unplugging one curious ear or two, she was the better show. Performance art, they call this.

"—*home,*" Robin was saying, "or the hospital, whichever you like. I'd take you there myself but I don't want to be seen with you."

"Oh, right," crowing to him, the air, the people watching, fuck them. "Maybe you'd rather I turn into Pauline. But I can't, can I? Unless you've got a taste on you, do you, Robin? Do you?" She slapped at the pockets of his velvet-look camo jacket, and he said something about she was embarrassing herself more than him and if she thought this was any and she screamed, literally, a scream as if she were being beaten with an iron bar, loud enough to pierce even the sludgey awareness of the last of the dancers, all of whom now frankly stared, giggled, shook their heads. One laughed outright and Sophy laughed, too, laughed herself all the way out the door where she found a cab without even trying, oh surely the fates were with her tonight, rode off, "Just drive," long strands of neon flowing by the window, strands like the neon in Pauline's hair.

I hate her I hate her, backseat litany with her nails eating away at her palms, I hate her I hate her I HATE HER and She's *me,* and the thought

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horrified her so she sat up, tried to, but the whiskey hugged her down and the cab kept going and she opened her eyes, one of her friends was dragging her into an elevator, her armpits ached from the pressure, she tried to talk but coughed into the taste of vomit instead.

"Boy, are you messed up," said the friend. "God must've remembered my address for you," smiling, "but *I* had to pay the cab," and this time she did throw up, amazing postmodern slurry of color and the friend steered her around it, through a door, onto a sofa. "Be right back," but before he was it was morning, she was gagging dryly into a pillow that smelled, strong and pleasant, of dog. But it was only gagging, it passed, and the friend was there as all at once she remembered his name, Richard.

"Oh Richard, God, I'm sorry—" and on the heels of that a retching sob.

Richard's eyebrows were shaven free, and one of his eyes was tremendously bloodshot, red as his toenails. Sophy, squashed against his skinny bare chest, a St. Sebastian medal bobbing back and forth as her tears shook him and abruptly there were no more, and she laughed; and he laughed, too.

"Richard—"

"Save it. The only thing you haven't done yet is shit your pants and I don't think I could stand that. Now. You want tea? I'll get some of those oyster crackers, too, cures the crotch-rot, good for everything." Sophy laughed, a looser sound this time, drank the tea when it came, ate the crackers, small salty circles in her mouth.

"Now." Richard cinched his robe, austere white gi, always the sign he meant business. "You wanna talk, or should we just pretend that it was one hell of a party and let it go at that?"

It was hard to get started, and the words when they came went in slow confusing stumbles; in the end she told not the truth, enough only to put a narrow line in his forehead, his face at once years older, colder. "What you're saying," cinching the gi again, garotte, "is that he's got you on some kind of drug, right, and he's using you in his drawings. Right?"

She had not spoken of Pauline; it was too much to confess, even to him. "Right."

"And this drug is addictive?"

Small shamed nod, as if it were entirely her fault that this was so.

Long breath of air expelled through thinned lips. "Are you moved out or what? Because you can stay here, long as you want. You know that, if you don't know anything else, and I swear Sophy sometimes you don't."

"I guess."

Silence. He rubbed at his face, pulling his skin into a hound dog scowl. "I gotta shower, I gotta dance tonight, Cherry Novae, you ever been there?" distanced chatter, yelling from the shower, the noise of it raising

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goosebumps on her skin, a private frown, had Robin ruined her for showers, too? Baths, she would just take baths. When Richard left she watched a 2D movie, the scrawl of flatscreen pictures cheering her, soothing her so she slept, wrapped in a ratty plaid comforter on the dog-smelling sofa.

A rowboat, she sat in a rowboat drifting, empty oarlocks, her hands cool and motionless in her lap as the boat moved across a dead-calm lake, nosing its aimless way through a parting sheaf of algae. Farther off she saw blue, not water but a manmade color, and saw it to be a shirt, a man's shirt, a man floating facedown in the water. My God, oh my God as he floated closer, he and the boat on an intersecting line, she reached into the scummy water to turn him over; it was hard, he was heavy, but she did it, sweat in her eyes as she hauled him up and saw, with a choking cry, that it was Robin, unmarked, unmarred, but dead, dead as a sarcophagus, and weeping she kissed him, kissed his soft dead lips and his eyes boiled open, wide, a crazyman's wink and his green grin as with effortless power he ripped her out of the boat and down, into the waiting water, green as a forest at night, green as stained glass in a convent.

Sick shivering, waves of it, like a beaten animal trembling itself to death; it was worse than the cramping nausea, worse even than the feeling of being constantly dirty, filthy, her skin coated with slime, no matter how often she washed it was the same. Splashing her face, Richard standing beside her in his tiny cramped bathroom, rag in hand for wiping up her thin vomit.

"You can kick it, Sophy, come on."

Her pores felt big as shiny manholes. The water hurt her skin.

"Damn it, anybody can kick anything! I know! You check yourself in, you get some help, that's how it's *done,* you know it? You know it, Soph?" He touched her shoulder, his face wearing that line again, and others, painful lines of vast concern and she felt like weeping for pushing off his hand but she could *not,* could not *stand* the touch of a person's hand, any person, any kind of touch. It was all she could bear to touch herself.

"I'll call you," how unnatural, that voice of hers, the towel like raw paper crackling against her skin, oh God she was filthy again already. "I just, I just need to—"

"You just need a taste. *Right,*" and the bitterness so intense, his turning-away magnified by her sickness, by the feeling of something live in her belly, some botched abortion roiling at last to vengeful life, and it made her scream, "It's not me it's not me IT'S NOT ME" over and over till the cab came.

He paid for that one, too.

Robin crouched atop the futon, braided hair half-undone, white curve

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of chunky china barely touching that richer, wetter curve, full underlip twisted between smile and scorn. The hair on his bare belly was gold, gold like a fairytale, honey-dark in the thatch beneath. He was naked except for his artistically ripped T-shirt: giddy shrunken head above the legend STICKLER FOR PUNISHMENT. Standing, legs ready to buckle, keys in hurting hand, Sophy believed it. Of herself.

"Got some coffee, there," little mocking nod towards the kitchen. "Or would you like something stronger?"

Her bones felt hollow. Her clothes were agony. Sidewalk salt, smeared on her boots, now smeared the indigo carpet; she imagined it, spoor, an eaten spot like a scar to mark her passing.

Robin drank, good to the last drop, set the cup into the clutter of the bedside table. Without looking his fingers scanned the mess, cigarettes, tissues, an empty glass, and extracted a bubblepack, slim green triangles. With as perfect a practiced motion he thumbed out two.

Her feet in her boots were burning. The kitchen, coffee sweet without sugar, her cold hands around the cup never warming. There was a scorched spot on her tongue, the coffee seared it so tears filled her eyes. Deliberately she drank more, held it in her mouth an awful second before swallowing, delaying the moment of ineffable surrender. Robin balanced the triangles on his thumbnails, his hands in little motions, as if he might begin juggling. Not smiling, "Go on. Sophy."

Tears, then, and she did not mark them, did not care or try, pity or rage or simple relief as she took the pills into her mouth, dry-swallowed, lay painfully back against the futon, still in coat and boots, to await the coming of the water. Her lids sagged, her hands fell palms-open, and the last thing she saw was Robin, preening, showing himself as he stripped off his T-shirt.

Welcome home, Pauline.

"Pig for it, aren't you." Obviously delighted. What was she a pig for? Who cares. "Do you know you even smell different when—don't shake your head at me, how would *you* know. You taste different, too." Smiling, luxurious the memory. "All over."

"How." Was that slur her?

Smiling harder, "Better."

Hans Peter: "I think I'll have to cut you a quantity discount." Robin laughed, distracted, pencil in hand. Sophy rubbed at her temples, a headache groaning to life behind her dry eyes. She felt like she had been fucking all night. Busy woman, that Pauline.

Niagara, in her ears; Hans Peter settled himself in the Myrtle chair. With any luck she was at least getting paid scale. Ha, ha, ha.

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Richard, on the phone: "—again. Can't you? *Please*, Sophy, *try*."

Sophy, eyes closed, long distance: "I tried that. Twice. It really doesn't work." She hung up, forgot she had.

Fugue.

Muscles, in rhythmic motion. A pain in her back, the back of her neck, itchy feeling like writhing ants. Boy was it hot in here.

Waking, when? later, Sophy remembered the heat, her skin felt as if it glowed from bad sunburn. Robin, half-sleeping, rubbed a caress down her arm, smiled sweet, *sweet*. Stopped both when he saw who it was.

"Why can't you be her all the time?" he said plaintively, and fell back to sleep.

He ran the drawings over and over, he said to edit, but half the time he wasn't even there when she was Sophy and so she sat, drinking milk or sometimes water, watching Pauline. The absolute strangeness never wore off, but sometimes that in itself was a kind of comfort: if not too strange to be happening, it was surely too strange to believe.

Sometimes people called for Pauline: Robin took the calls; it all seemed to delight him. Once she called him Frankenstein, and he laughed.

"She's no monster," he said. "She's what *you* would be, if you were worth a shit."

Slowly Sophy sat up, stared at him, dull-eyed. "I could kill myself, you know. I can still do that."

Fear then, anger, it was all rather gratifying: his career and his lover, down the drain in one fell swoop. She would have done it, too, in a minute. But she didn't like drains.

Blurry sound, the stretch of skin, sight lines clear and the lucidity terrifying, and Robin crouched before her, eyes narrow: "You glitching, babe?" a voice much too kind to be his, not talking to *her;* surely she was dreaming, Pauline's dreams.

Coming to? Yes, or something, smashing sound, the faux crystal water glasses one jagged wet glitter in the kitchen sink, smashing the very last one when Robin, Hans Peter behind, let himself in. He gaped, a singularly stupid look, Hans Peter prim in his disapproval.

Sophy smiled at them, a working, sagging grin, reached long to pinch Hans Peter's gray leather sleeve in a grotesque parody of playfulness. "Gotta dose for me, coach?"

His fingers were colder even than hers as he passed her the bubblepack. "Temperamental," he said, nodding toward the sink. "Like any actor, I suppose. But remember," including Robin in his gaze, remote, "the dosage increase—I don't recommend this and I don't condone it. And I won't be answerable for it."

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Robin, leaping to the self-defense, amazing his reflexes: "I *told* her, I said—"

Sophy, numb hands, tucking the bubblepack into the pocket of her robe, smiling sideways through a falling curtain of unbraided hair, "I have to have some fun," and in a motion curiously balletic reached into the sink and flung a handful of broken glass at them, at their staring eyes, and they jumped, separate directions, as she laughed out loud, slapped a bleeding palm to the austere white counter, where it left a stain like the mark of the dead. It was, she thought, a Pauline thing to do.

Less and less hours as Sophy, Robin demanding in his worry, threatening to hide the drugs if she didn't stop it, slow down at least, and she laughed, literally in his face, pushing hers close to do it: "Go ahead," and laughed again through the grind in her skull; dreams, a state of constant subliminal bleedthrough, recalling things that never happened, charmed by the sense of shapes and the taste of black licorice on her tongue, she had never been able to bear licorice but now it was a thing to savor, that and the sound of drums and water and someone's music, a feeling like chasing memory, the Red Queen's endless race. Yes.

But what if *two* people are running?

Harsh boil of confusion, heat and her eyes, bounding open, flapping, it seemed, like cartoon windowshades and her own shock nothing as to Robin's: so vast as to be almost comical, seeing Sophy staring out of Pauline's eyes, staring right at him. They were in bed, he was just going in, and with convulsive grace she rolled, throwing his weight and riding the momentum to rise astraddle, his whole body limp beneath her and with all her strength she punched him in the face, feeling something mash behind her fingers as blood burst from his nose like a time-lapse flower, pushed him half off the futon as his hands struggled to his face and he stared, stared, the widest blue eyes in the world.

Cold bathroom floor, she took a shower, burning water, came out to find Robin mute in the doorway. Under his nose the blood was gelling. She slapped the bubblepack from his hands.

"You can forget that shit," she said.

Pushing past him, it was like pushing paper. Quickly, efficiently, she dressed, brushed her hair into a long wet chignon. Robin looked as if he might be sick, or cry. He made no move to wipe away the blood. "Who are you?" he said.

"Nobody you know."

Sip of iced tea, ice cube rattled against her tooth. It hurt, a little. The

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sugar in the tea was gritty as sand, the whole coffee shop smelled like grease. Figured he would pick such a cheap place to meet. Sophy said, "Have you ever read Bennett Braun? You should."

Unshaven this morning, a curiously aged look to mouth and eyes. Had she ever really loved that face, really? Honest answer: yes. Honest question: why? He said, "Who's Bennett Braun?" in a voice that did not know whether to be hard or soft, contemptuous or respectful.

"Pioneer in the field. Multiples. Oh come on," annoyed at his ignorance, "multiple *personality,* you know, the stuff you turned me on to. Flip state, remember?" He did not speak. "Did you know there's such a thing as spontaneous integration? Most people need therapy to get them there, or get them ready. I didn't."

Miserable, he stirred his three-dollar coffee, sideways glance at her; he would never, now, look at her without wariness. It almost made her want to smile. Almost.

"In some people," lecturer's nod, "the original personality fracture is a reaction to a prolonged state of abuse or violence—a personality, or two, or several, are created to 'take the pain.' You see I've been busy. It's amazing what you can accomplish when you don't waste your time with fucking video drawings."

"You don't understand," rubbing at his lower lip, nervous continuous circle of finger on flesh, "you're the, I *need* you, I need you in my drawings. I need *Pauline,*" a soft wail, he wanted to say more but she cut him off, neatly, like a surgeon.

"Hans Peter," she said, "was my midwife. Oh, do I owe him." She drank off the last of the tea. "You still don't get it, do you? *Pauline,*" dragging out the word, "is not addicted. To anything. Never was. But now we're *both* clean as a whistle," pursed lips, little mocking noodle of sound. He did not move as she did, did not watch her leave. The chair he had chosen provided a full ray of gorgeous light, full on his averted, suffering face. She had to laugh, then.

At the apartment, leather bag filled and neat on the futon like a patient pet, and she took up the masters, all the tapes, all the hours she had watched, milk glass in hand. How many copies had he made, sold? Did it matter?

The phone went off, small startled buzz; she half-expected Robin but it was Richard, are you all right, you never called, how *are* you?

"Fine," she said, loading the first tape, thumb firm and cool on ERASE. "I'm fine." Images, flickering, dwindling down to gray, double-bars and no bars, the whole collection gone to slippery darkness, existence only in memory.

And memory is such a personal thing. ●

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OLD ROBOTS ARE THE WORST

by Bruce Boston

Lurching down the stairs,
asking questions twice,
pacing in lopsided circles
as they speculate aloud
on the cycles of man,
the transpiration of tragedy,
debating the industrial revolution
and its ultimate unraveling
in sonorous undertones.

And all the while
they are talking and pacing
and avoiding our calls,
we must wait and listen,
annoyed, yet with increasing
wonder at the depth and breadth
of their encyclopedic knowledge,
the strained eclectic range
of their misunderstandings.

And all the while
their tedious palaver grows
more sophistic and abstruse,
the nictitating shutters
of their eyes send and receive
signals we have yet to translate,
a cyberglyph of a language
composed of tics and winks
and lightning exclamations.

At last they come to answer,
to wheel us to the elevators,
and you know, despite their
incompetence and intransigence,
beyond their endless babbling,
one gets attached to the old things,
inured to their clank and shuffle,
accustomed to the slow caress
of their crinkled rubber flesh.

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A DEEPER SEA

by Alexander Jablokov

"A Deeper Sea" was inspired by the image "of a whale floating in orbit around Jupiter. Just that, without explanation or meaning. The story is an attempt to explain that image, to discover how that unfortunate whale came to be there," remarks Alexander Jablokov. Mr. Jablokov recently finished his first novel, *The Man Who Carved the Sky*, and is now in the process of writing his second.

art: Hisaki Yasuda

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The whale screamed in fear, the complex harmonics of its terror rumbling in the warm water around Ilya Stasov. He hung tensely in the null-g hub of the research space station Jupiter Forward. Stasov had concealed himself in an aquarium with the ecology of a Caribbean coral reef. He hung there, pulling water through his artificial gills, and listened to the whale as it screamed from the cold wastes of interplanetary space. The multicolored fish surrounding Stasov had adapted to the lack of gravitational orientation, and floated with their dorsal fins in all directions, oblivious to the whale's cry.

The sperm whale screamed again. Stasov tightened himself into a ball, as if to escape the sound, then straightened and twitched a finger, calling on the imaging capabilities of Jupiter Forward's computer system. The space station orbited in Ganymede's trailing trojan point, and the whale floated near it. Instead of leaving the tank and going into space to confront the whale, Stasov brought the Jovian system into the water.

Banded Jupiter appeared in the aquarium like a sunken fishing float. A moray eel in a crevice watched it carefully, judging its edibility. Stasov imagined the chill of interplanetary space penetrating the tropical water. Ganymede rolled among the sea anemones like a jetting snail. He sucked hyperoxygenated water through his carotid gill attachments and looked for the cyborg sperm whale.

"Calm," he murmured through his throat mike. "Calm." He was linked directly to the whale's auditory centers.

The whale's image was still invisible in his view. Another finger twitch, and Jupiter shrank while Ganymede swelled. The water darkened in the tank and the stars peeked through above the coral. The fish ignored these astronomical manifestations and went calmly about their business. The image of Ganymede grew to the point that Stasov felt himself flying over its rough surface. He no longer saw the tank in which he floated.

The sperm whale suddenly breached the surface of darkness and rose up out of Ganymede's invisible shadow. Fusion rockets burned blue along his length. Sunlight gleamed along the whale's great ridged bulk and glittered on the tessellations of the phased microwave array on his back.

But where was the goddam dolphin? "Weissmuller," Stasov said. "Speak to Clarence." Silence. "The whale needs your words." A longer silence. "Damn it, Weissmuller, where are you?" His left hand throbbed and he clenched it into a fist, as well as he could.

His only answer was the roaring hiss of Jupiter's magnetic field and the low murmur of the engineers as they checked the function of the whale's engines. Stasov keyed in more astronomical data. Ganymede shrank to a marble. The entire Jovian system now floated in the tank,

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satellite orbits marked, the computer giving him direct perception of their gravity wells sinking like holes in deep perspective. The space station of Jupiter Forward appeared in Ganymede's trojan point, a bright dot. The computer located the transponder on the dolphin's space suit and displayed it as a spark. Stasov looked at Weissmuller's current location and swore.

The dolphin had dived into Io's gravity well and been slingshot out towards Europa. Jupiter's plunging gravity well gaped before Stasov's eyes and he felt as if he were being sucked down into a whirlpool. He fought down a moment of terror. The dolphin's spark climbed slowly up towards him. Weissmuller always played things close to the edge. It would be hours before the dolphin could get back to Jupiter Forward.

Stasov examined Clarence's image, wanting to stroke the whale's back to comfort him. A trigger fish examined the hologram, seemingly surprised to see a sperm whale its own size, then darted away with a contemptuous flick of its fins. The real Clarence, desperately alone in space, of course perceived nothing of this.

Despite the immense modifications to his body, Clarence was still vaguely cetacean, though he now had vast, complex control planes to guide him through the Jovian atmosphere, making him look like a whale decorated with streamers as a float in a parade. Stasov spoke calming words, but he wasn't an expert in sperm whale dialect. That wasn't why he was there. The whale continued to send out echo-location clicks in the microwave band, unable to understand how he had lost consciousness on an island in the Maldives, in the Indian Ocean, and awoken here, in a mysterious place he had never heard of, a place of no water, no fish, and a dozen featureless spheres.

Irregular bursts of rocket appeared along Clarence's sides, spinning him. Data streamed into the tank, crowding the fish: fuel use, accelerations, circuit status. Voices muttered technical jargon. Stasov felt as he had when as a child, put to bed early, listening to the intent, incomprehensible adult conversation of his parents' friends through the closed bedroom door.

"Erika," Stasov said, keying another comm line.

"Director Morgenstern's line," a heavy male voice answered.

"Miller." Stasov hadn't expected the Security Chief's voice. But if he had him . . . "Why is the dolphin running loose around Io?"

"There's something wrong with your comm, Colonel. You sound like you're underwater. You'd better check it."

Stasov kept one eye on the increasingly agitated whale. "I'm not a colonel," he snapped. "I hold no such rank. Please give me Director Morgenstern. We can deal with your dereliction of duty later."

"Dereliction, Colonel?" Paul Miller's voice had the lazy drawl that

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Stasov associated with thuggish political policemen and prison camp guards, whether they were American, Russian, or Japanese. "The dolphin wanted to go. My men aren't KGB officers." He chuckled. Stasov knew that sound well: the laugh of an interrogator putting a subject at ease before hitting him again. He'd heard it over and over during his months at Camp Homma. It had begun to seem an essential part of torture. "Should we have held him under physical restraint? That would be a treaty violation. Do you want me to order my men to commit a—"

"Damn it, Miller, quit babbling and get me the Director!" Stasov tried to conceal his sudden fear under anger.

"You just watch yourself, Colonel." Miller's voice was suddenly cold. "None of us are under your orders. It's a long way from Uglegorsk. The Director's busy. I don't have to—"

"Ilya," Erika Morgenstern's voice broke in. "What's the problem?"

"Cut all of the whale's systems immediately," Stasov said tensely. "None of the problems are on the engineering side. He's not responsible. Weissmuller's off somewhere around Io and I can't handle the whale alone. I know it throws the schedule off. And the budget. But do it."

Morgenstern didn't hesitate. The hectic flaring lights along the whale's sides died and it floated, quiescent. "Done," she said. Subliminally Stasov heard cries of surprise and frustration from the engineers testing the vehicle. The vehicle. Clarence the cyborg sperm whale, hanging in orbit around Jupiter. He was there. Stasov could see him, but still wasn't sure he believed it. Test levels dropped to zero.

Stasov swam slowly to the tank's surface and edged out through the enhanced-surface-tension barrier that held the liquid sphere together, feeling the boundary as a line of almost painful pressure on his skin. He floated into the air, globules of water drifting off his body and reuniting with the large, quivering sphere of the fish tank. Once he had detached the carotid oxygenation connections he drew a deep, painful breath of the unfriendly air, re-establishing his ventilation reflexes. His diaphragm contracted painfully, having relaxed during his conditioned apnea.

A tiny fish flopped in the air, pulled out of the water along with him. Stasov shepherded it back to the tank. The cold air gave him goose bumps, and he shivered. He pulled himself over to an actual porthole and peered out at space. Clarence floated, surrounded by vehicles and swarming human beings, afflicting him as had the parasites that had clung to him in the seas of Earth. It would be hours before Weissmuller returned. Something had to be done. Stasov felt a twisting in his belly. It had been a long time since he'd tortured a dolphin. He knew that if he did it again, it would be his last act. But he could see no other way.

* * *

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"Ilya," Erika Morgenstern said in exasperation. "You have to realize what these people think you are. What they call you—"

"The Shark of Uglegorsk," he finished. "You and I have been through all that. They don't understand anything."

Morgenstern stared at him with those efficient brown-green eyes that seemed able to see through both glare and darkness with equal ease. The first time he had seen those eyes they had spelled his salvation. He tried never to forget that. "You're the one who's not aware of anything. I have to balance two hundred fifty people from twenty countries aboard this space station, and turn in a job of research to boot. Hatred and fear aren't imaginary."

Stasov rubbed his maimed left hand and looked back at her. The room was in half darkness, as she preferred, giving her head, with its flat face and short, graying coppery hair, the look of an astronomical object. She held court in an imperial style which would have dismayed her superiors at the UN Planetary Exploration Directorate—had they been permitted to know about it—guarded by acolytes like Miller, aloof, inaccessible, but aware of everything that went on aboard Jupiter Forward. Stasov was sometimes startled by what had become of her.

"They should still be able to do their jobs," he said. "Or is your authority over them insufficient?"

She didn't flush—she had more control than that—but she narrowed her eyes in an expression of authority, to let him know that he'd gone too far. He stared back at her with the pale-blue-eyed absence of expression that let her know that he'd been through worse than she could ever throw at him.

A hologram of Jupiter gave the room what light it had. The planet was sliced apart to show magnetic fields and convection cells, as if Morgenstern could as easily order a modification in the circulation of the Great Red Spot as she could in the air pressure of the storage lockers or the menu in the dining hall.

"We've come this far together," she said. "Since Homma. Now we're about to drop a cyborg sperm whale into the Jovian atmosphere." She shook her head. "I'm still not sure I believe it. But I can't risk the anger of the Delphine Delegation. They provide most of our financing. You know that. Miller's an idiot, but he's right. We cannot physically restrain an intelligent cetacean. It violates the Treaty of Santa Barbara." Her voice still had a trace of an accent from her native New Zealand.

"Articles 12 and 13," Stasov muttered. "Open Seas and Freedom of Entities. Damn right I know it. Better than anyone else. And dolphins love the letter of the law. They think it's the stupidest thing they ever heard, but they use it whenever it's convenient. They can afford good lawyers."

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"Exactly. I can't jeopardize the project. Not now. Not ever. The Delphine Delegation keeps us on a short enough financial tether as it is."

"Miller didn't oppose me because of the Treaty," Stasov spat. "He did it because he thinks dolphins are wonderful innocent creatures, and because he hates me for what he imagines I did to them. There's nothing more terrifying than a sentimental thug. By letting him oppose me, *you* are jeopardizing the project. That's not just a machine out there. It's a perceptive being, trapped in a metal shell and hauled to a world he doesn't understand. He's going mad. Weissmuller's *already* crazy. Even for a dolphin. Look clearly, Erika. The project could end here."

She looked at him. He didn't have to say any more. Looking clearly was what she did best. It had taken her from an after-college job as a junior observer on a UN War Crimes commission to one of the most powerful jobs in the UN Planetary Exploration Directorate. And it had been the look behind Stasov's eyes, in the gardens of Camp Homma, that had given her the first glimpse of the direction to move in.

"All right," she said, finally. "Do what you have to."

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course I do!" she blazed. "I said it, didn't I? I'm giving you full authority, answerable only to me. Do what you want to your dolphin Messiah and his acolyte. Just get the project moving."

"Don't mock me, Erika," Stasov said heavily. "Don't ever mock me." He stood, raising himself up slowly in the low gravity. Director Morgenstern's comm terminal had been flickering constantly, and there were undoubtedly a dozen crises already piled up while she had chatted with her unpopular and essential Cetacean Liaison. "The project will move."

She eyed him, suddenly the more uncertain, younger woman he remembered. "Ilya. What do you mean to do?"

"Don't ask me," he said, his voice dead. "I'll only do what's necessary."

Uglegorsk, October 2019

"You don't seem like a man who would be interested in stories, Colonel," Georgios Theodoros said as he stumbled up the wet stone steps, his long coat inadequate protection against the wind blowing off the Tatar Strait.

Colonel Stasov smiled, the third large star on his officer's shoulder boards new enough that he still enjoyed the novelty of the salutation, even from a foreign civilian. "It's not just a story, is it? It's evidence that what we are doing has been done before."

"I'm not sure that's true. It's all allegorical, allusive." Theodoros, a dreamy-eyed Greek with an ecclesiastical beard, stopped on one of the

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landings, affecting to examine the view, but actually to rest. There was little enough to look at. The sea before him was gray, with sharp-toothed waves. The thick clouds lowering over it obscured the boundary between sea and sky. This was nothing like the warm, dark Aegean where he did his delphine research. The island Sakhalin was a rough, hard place. That was why this Russian Colonel with his pale blue eyes was so intense in his work. Though those eyes sometimes shone with the joy of a true discoverer, a look that had automatically led Theodoros to accept the other as a friend.

"No," Stasov stated decisively. "What humans and dolphins did during the reign of the Cretan Thalassocracy is significant to us here. That's why we brought you. Not just to hear stories. Thirty-five hundred years ago they developed the mental technology to deal with the problem. I believe you have brought the vestiges of that technology with you to Uglegorsk." He tugged at the binoculars he wore around his neck.

"They claimed to speak to dolphins," Theodoros murmured. "Perhaps they did." For years, no one had listened to his theories, and now that someone was willing to, he found himself somehow reluctant, uncertain of the consequences. The Soviets weren't interested in mere theories. They meant to act.

The research station at Uglegorsk sprawled out beneath them. Beauty being pointless against the cold rocks of Sakhalin, the station had seemingly striven for extreme ugliness, and succeeded in the Soviet manner. The metal huts, some of WWII Lend-Lease vintage, were rusted and patched. Holding pens crowded the shoreline, their captive dolphins splashing and leaping. The base was dominated by the concrete vault of the dolphin laboratory, built with more recent American aid.

Theodoros's specialty was human-dolphin interactions during the second millennium BCE, a research topic too vague for delphine researchers and too practical for classicists and mythologists. So he had been surprised when he received an official invitation from the Vladivostok Oceanographic Institute to fly out to Uglegorsk to talk with Ilya Stasov. It hadn't been simply a polite facility tour followed by an hour talk, either. He'd been questioned intently for three days. A map of the Aegean Sea now hung in the main seminar room, the sites of Cretan cities marked on it, with a big star on Thera, the island that was the remnants of the great volcano whose eruption had brought an end to Cretan civilization. The Soviet researchers gathered in front of it to argue, arms waving, in their loud Russian. He and Stasov spoke English with each other.

The burly Colonel sat down on a rock wall and stared off to sea. "Could you tell me the story, Georgios? Never mind how insignificant it seems."

Had the man really climbed up all this way for a view of various shades

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of gray? Through binoculars yet? Theodoros shivered and sat down next to Stasov.

"It took place on Delos, long enough ago that the Egyptians had no Pharaoh, and built with reeds. A singer lived on this island, a lyre player who had dedicated his life to Apollo and played to the sky and the sea. After a storm, the singer went down to the sandy shore to see what the sea had tossed up. On the beach lay a whale, sighing at the knowledge of his certain death. He cried thick, bitter tears.

" 'Why are you here, brother?' the lyre player called. 'Why are you not off tossing the sea over your back, as is the natural duty of whales?'

" 'I have come to hear your songs,' the whale replied. 'Sing to me, while I die.'

"The singer sang to the whale for three days, while the birds wheeled and cried overhead and the sun rose and set and the whale's flesh began to stink. At the end of the third day the whale died. The man wept and sprinkled water on the whale's head, since dust seemed improper, and wished him good hunting in the world to which whales go, for he did not think that Hades had a place for him.

"He looked out into the sea and saw a dolphin dancing. The dolphin leaped and gamboled, but said nothing. When he saw the man on the shore he first ignored him, then slid up onto the shore.

" 'Do you wish to sing to your dead brother?' the lyre player asked. The dolphin said nothing. 'His soul needs your songs to speed him to the dark sea where he now swims.' Still the dolphin said nothing. 'He cries for the sound of your voice.' The dolphin remained silent. In a rage, the singer raised up his lyre and broke it over the dolphin's head. 'Speak not then, dumb beast, and go to your death unknown.'

"Blood came from the dolphin's blowhole and he cried out. 'Why do you torment me so?'

" 'To teach you the responsibilities of death and the songs that it calls for,' the singer said.

" 'I will hear you then,' the dolphin said. 'Teach me the songs, if you will not let me be silent.'

"And so the man taught the dolphin to sing the rhythmic songs of the ancients, those sung by shepherds at first light, by fishermen pulling in full nets, by priests to the brow of the impending storm. The dolphin took the songs and made them his own, adding the sounds of the sea.

"Apollo, hearing the songs, came down laughing, though his hands smelled of blood and corruption. He was an Asian god then, from Lycia, but was on his way to lead the Greeks.

" 'I have slain the monster, Typhaon, at Crisa beneath snowy Parnassus,' he told them. 'My Temple and wooded grove are to be there. Now

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that you are able to sing, friend dolphin, you will aid me. Find me my priests.'

" 'The sea moves,' the dolphin said. 'The land is solid. I will search.'

"The dolphin swam the seas until he saw a ship of Cretan priests bound for Pylos. He sang to them from the sea and they followed him, to that place beneath Parnassus that was, forever afterward, to be called Delphi, after the dolphin who had led them. Men and dolphins spoke from that time afterward."

Theodoros felt the warm light of the Aegean island die, and found himself again sitting on a cold stone wall above the Tatar Strait.

"It's there," Stasov said, pacing back and forth in front of Theodoros. "I know it is. But why did they stop talking?" His pale eyes stared at Theodoros as if suspecting the Greek of concealing something.

"The story doesn't say. My guess would be that it had something to do with the eruption of Strogyle, the great volcano on Thera. Whether it was the cause or not, that seems to mark the end of Cretan civilization. Once the men stopped talking, perhaps the dolphins did also."

"And have refused ever since out of sheer spite? Perhaps, perhaps. But I think there's more. The volcano . . . interesting . . . " Stasov continued to pace, then froze, staring out over the water. He put his binoculars to his eyes.

"What do you see?" asked Theodoros.

"I see a need for our work," Stasov said. He pointed. In the haze at the horizon Theodoros could barely discern a dark ship. "That's a Japanese vessel. The Americans have been allowing them to build armed cruisers. A mistake. The Japanese claim the southern half of Sakhalin, you know."

Theodoros had no idea why anyone would be interested in the place, but decided not to say so. "I don't think the Americans can do too much to stop them, Colonel Stasov."

"True enough. Though the Americans may soon find themselves in a war they don't want." Stasov paused. "Do the dolphins have a religion, do you suppose?"

"Colonel Stasov, I suggest that we should first learn how to talk with them, and only then worry about their religion."

"True, perhaps," Stasov replied, staring thoughtfully out to sea. "Though that may be the wrong way round." He roused himself. "Come down then. You can drink with us one last time before you leave. You have given me much to think about."

Theodoros, his stomach churning at the thought of another of the massive drinking bouts which, besides arguing, seemed to be the only form of entertainment at Uglegorsk, followed Stasov back down the stairs.

The vaulted dolphin research center was as huge inside as an aircraft

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hangar. The floor was always wet, and the air smelled of seaweed and iodine. Cables snaked across the floor with no attention to safety. Theodoros tripped over them constantly, even sober, while the Russians had no trouble even when roaring drunk.

The farewell party had spread among the tanks, as such events always did, as if the researchers wanted to include the dolphins in their festivities. Stasov and Theodoros found a quiet corner to finish their discussion. Stasov balanced a bottle of vodka on a signal processing box and handed the other a pickle out of an unlabeled jar. It seemed to the Greek that everything was pickled here: the cucumbers, the cabbage, the peppers, the fish, and the researchers. He tossed back a shot of vodka, took a bite of pickle, and grimaced.

Stasov chuckled. "You've learned to do it like a real Russian. The trick is to never look as though you enjoy it."

"I *don't* enjoy it."

"Ha. You are a real Russian."

The huge form of General Anatoly Ogurtsov loomed over them. "More of these damn foreign computers for you, Ilya?" He waved a stack of requisition sheets at him. "How can our budget support this?"

Stasov shrugged. "Sit down, Antosha." He poured the General a glass of vodka. "I need sophisticated array processors. Who else makes them but the Japanese?"

"Damn their yellow souls," Ogurtsov said, in ceremonial anathema. "They do make good gadgets. I hope we can buy enough to defeat them when we go to war." He sighed hugely. "That's all image processing gear. Why do you need it?"

"I think I know how to reach the dolphins," Stasov said. "Aural images."

"An interesting thought," Theodoros said. "What sort of images?"

"That's where I'll need your help. I'll need good sonic maps of the Aegean, and best guesses from oceanographic archaeologists on the conformation of the sea bottom at about 1500 BCE. Can you do it?"

"I think so." Theodoros was startled once again. When he had come here, to find the crude pens of inferior concrete already cracking, the drunken technicians, the obsolete foreign electronic equipment cadged or stolen from other research projects, he had been sure that he was wasting his time. Compared to the clean redwood boards and earnest college students of Santa Barbara or the elegant institutes at Monaco, this place was a hell hole. But somehow . . .

"We'll do it, you know," Ogurtsov rumbled. "Ilya will make sure that we do."

"General," Theodoros said. "I have no doubt that you're right."

* * *

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The Americans had found it surprisingly difficult to defend their Alaskan frontier, but they fought viciously every step of the way. The assault of Kagalaska Island, supposedly a surprise attack, faced brutal resistance from its first moment. Such *desant* operations were new to the Soviet Navy, and they were only gradually learning how to handle landing assaults. The price of the lessons was high.

Long before his own ship came into range, Colonel Ilya Stasov was listening to the first casualty reports.

"Death, death, death," the dolphin keened. "The fuckers left me behind. Their lives have found completion. They're dead." Her voice came over a background roar, leaving it almost incomprehensible.

"Calm down, Harmonia," Stasov said, realizing that it was an easy instruction to give if you were out of the battle area. "What happened?"

". . . exploding eggs. They don't listen to us anymore. You shark spawn, Stasov, you said they would listen!"

"It must be a new type of mine, Harmonia," Stasov yelled in reply, as the noise in his headphones increased. "Some new magnetic detector. We'll get the data—"

"Fish, fish. I won't go back until you give me a fish."

"You don't have to go back. Pull out now. We'll do a magnetic field analysis—"

"I want a belly full of fish for this, turd swallower!" With that, the line went dead. As it did, the landing ship itself thrummed, and the thunder of an explosion roared down the hatch from outside. He waited for the sound to die away, but instead it grew insanely louder, reverberating. It was the roar of the attack, and was not about to end. He raced up the companionway.

"Priblyudov!" he yelled at the comm officer over the noise. "The Americans have sowed the shore with a new type of mine. I've lost most of my first wave of dolphins. Send this info back to the *Novgorod*." He waved a sheet of notes. The comm officer stared at him dully. "Hurry up!"

While Priblyudov stumbled to obey, Stasov plugged his earphones into the console and linked back up with his microphones. He stepped out onto the deck in the cold northern sunlight. Stasov stared in horror at the bare rock of Kagalaska, which loomed ahead of the long deck of the landing ship, wreathed in smoke. Rockets flared over his head and the 76 mm bow guns thundered at the shore. Below decks, he knew, a battalion of troops was gathered, with battle tanks and assault vehicles. Two landing ships had already hit the island. Stasov listened to his earphones.

The gray waters were covered with flaming oil. The dolphins, *his* dol-

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phins, were strangling in it, their death cries cutting high above the rumbling of the engines and the crunching of propellers. The hazy arctic air was full of the sharp stink of oil and burning flesh. The other two landing ships had spilled their loads and the rocky shore ahead was covered with assault troops, swarming like isopods. Stasov closed his eyes, listening to the screams of death in his earphones. The thud of the American torpedo as it found the landing ship's unarmored side was impossibly loud, agony in his ears.

The ship slowed as if hitting a sandbar, and listed. Stasov slid down to the railing, vaulted over it, and hit the water. He felt freezing water on his face, but his assault uniform instantly compensated, keeping his body warm. Another explosion, which he felt with his body, and the landing ship sank as if pulled under by a giant hand. Stasov stroked away to keep from being sucked down with it.

He pulled off his now-useless headphones and activated his throat mike. He called to those of his dolphins that had survived that far. Pitifully few.

Suddenly Stasov heard the call of a hunting orca, a killer whale which sped through the struggling forms of the drowning assault troops who had escaped the landing ship, calling "Speak, food!" and devouring them when they did not reply. He came to Stasov. "Speak, food!" "I am Ilya Sergeiivich Stasov," he replied, insulting the orca by speaking in dolphin dialect. "Go fuck a walrus." It was amazing how quickly the ancient prohibition on conversation with humans vanished once it had been violated at Uglegorsk. The orca nudged him once, breaking several ribs, snorted "Spoiled food," and vanished into the polluted darkness.

The thunder of the assault lessened as the American troops were pushed back from the beachhead. The bodies of men and dolphins littered the shore, flopped on the rocks by the receding tide. A black line of oil and blood marked the highest rise of the water. Stasov climbed through the bodies. A rough road had been laid out and tanks ground up it. Bulldozers were already cutting out a landing strip. A few pockets of resistance were still being mopped up inland, but otherwise the island was in Soviet hands. Stasov made his way to the *desant* commander's temporary HQ.

"The American *Aegis* cruiser *Wainwright* is approaching in convoy from Kodiak," General Lefortov said. The whites of his eyes had turned yellow and he looked like a dead man. The assault force had suffered numbingly high casualties. They were far from land-based aircraft and the air cover provided by the carrier *Nizhni Novgorod* was insufficient to defend against an *Aegis* task force. "What can your dolphins do?"

"What's left of them?"

General Lefortov pointed his dead eyes at Stasov. He'd lost enough of

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his own men to be indifferent to the fate of Stasov's precious dolphins. "We lost two attack submarines in the Bering Sea. The enemy advance is unopposed. What can you do?"

"Do?" Stasov said wearily. He thought about the dolphins and equipment he had left. "We can sink it. It'll cost—"

"It might cost the war if we don't. Prepare your troops. I'll print up your orders."

"Yes sir."

Bataan, the Philippines, May 2024

Stasov slipped gently across the smooth wood of the porch into the hot butter of the Philippine sunlight. He moved slowly, his joints rough and unlubricated, as if he were a child's bicycle left long out in the rain. The Japanese guards at the door of the barracks smiled at him as he passed, an expression he had long since ceased to try to interpret. Cracking dolphin communications had been easier. He had adopted a purely behavioral operant conditioning model, letting blows, punishment cells, and food full of vermin modify his actions without the intervention of his conscious mind. He no longer tried to reason with the outside world, he simply responded to it. That let him keep his soul to himself.

They'd started feeding him well several weeks before, a signal of his imminent release. He had refused to feel hope. It was not beyond them to use the illusion of freedom to get him to betray himself. Yesterday they had allowed him an hour in a hot Japanese bath, and this morning they had dressed him in a rather elegant suit of blue silk. It was much too large, made, perhaps, to the measurements in his records, from the start of his incarceration. His fingers had had trouble tying the knot on the tie, so one of the guards had delicately done it for him. It was not the regulation military knot he had been trying for, at least not of his army, but it would do. The high collar hid the scars on his neck where his carotid oxygenator had once attached. It wasn't until he actually walked out into the sun that Stasov began to think that he might be free.

Outside the barracks was a tiled patio where the camp's officers had often had parties at night with the local women. A woman waited for him there now. Not one of those dark-haired beauties that had been one of Luzon's main exports for centuries, but a fair-skinned woman with coppery hair, the New Zealand member of the UN delegation to Camp Homma. She held a notebook.

"Colonel Stasov?" she said, standing. She was a plain-faced woman, strong. "My name is Erika Morgenstern."

They shook hands. "Not Colonel," he murmured. "Not any more." The

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hot sun made him dizzy, and the smell of the exuberant bougainvillaea that bloomed all around them seemed to clog his nostrils. His knees buckled and he sat down.

She watched him narrowly. "Are you in need of medical assistance?"

He shook his head. "No, certainly not. I have been . . . cared for."

"The Americans are unhappy about Camp Homma," she said, scribbling in her notebook. "Any information you can give the UN will be useful. Any violations of humane conditions."

He looked at her. "If I am being released, the time for Camp Homma must be almost over. The Japanese have a new empire to contend with. Including Sakhalin, I understand. American concerns are a minor problem." Stasov had been captured at Uglegorsk with the collapse of the last Soviet naval effort in the Sea of Okhotsk, by Japanese troops bent on avenging the atrocities of the Soviet occupation of Hokkaido.

The Japanese had chosen Bataan for their war crimes detention camp, for they were displaying as much their victory over their American allies in the Pacific War as over their Soviet enemy. They named the camp Homma, after the Japanese general who had commanded the invasion of the Philippines in 1942, a deliberate insult to which the Americans were powerless to reply.

"Nevertheless," she said. "If you have been mistreated—"

"If I have been mistreated it is only just," he replied. "Americans make poor victors. They are too forgiving. The Japanese are more like Russians. They demand justice, and perhaps a bit more. Or have you forgotten that you are talking to the Shark of Uglegorsk?"

She looked startled. "Having a nickname is not a crime. The Japanese have charged you with genocide and slavery, crimes you committed against the very species whose intelligence was demonstrated by your researches. These charges, however, are *ex post facto*—are you familiar with the term?"

"Soviet law is not very sophisticated, I'm afraid."

A Japanese guard brought them tea in graceful earthenware cups. With calm deliberation, Stasov poured the tea on the ground and let the cup fall on the pavement, where it cracked into pieces. The guard bowed expressionlessly, cleaned up the shards, and walked slowly away.

"What did they want from you?" Morgenstern asked. "What did they want to know?"

"They were curious about my work, my methods. My secrets."

"What did they learn?"

Stasov grimaced. "I learned more from them than they did from me. The Japanese have little sympathy for cetaceans. They murder them with less concern than even Russians. Their curiosity was purely practical. I told them little, and that little took them a long time to discover.

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I know what that's like. I've been on the other side of it. But they showed me that my life is not yet closed. I will continue living. That's no small thing to learn, and I should be grateful." The rustle of a rat in a palm tree made him jump. It took a moment for his heart to slow. "Are you a dolphin researcher, Ms. Morgenstern?"

"No. My interest is planetary exploration. Little enough use for that now, I'm afraid. After the Pacific War, the world's too poor to afford it."

He stared at her for a long time, long enough for her to worry that he was having some sort of traumatic stress attack. "That's an interesting point," he said, finally, his voice betraying no particular emotion. "Interesting indeed. No, we can't afford it. But others might be able to."

Two days later they crossed Manila Bay to Cavite, where the Soviet delegation waited. Sea gulls spun in the hot, wet air. The water was glass smooth, with a long, sickening swell. Suddenly, all around them, the water was filled with the flashing forms of dolphins. They leaped out of the water, occasionally clearing the boat itself. Stasov sat at the stern underneath the flapping Rising Sun and looked out at them.

The white-jacketed Japanese pilot accelerated and began to slew back and forth, though whether to avoid the dolphins or to hit them was not clear.

"Are they glad to see you alive?" Morgenstern shouted over the roar of the motor.

Stasov looked thoughtful. "Glad isn't the word. They know that something has been left undone. They will see me do it."

"Isn't something always left undone, Ilya? I don't understand."

"If something is always left undone, then no one would ever be allowed to die."

Morgenstern turned away from her incomprehensible charge and looked back out at the dolphins. Most of them were dark blue-gray, their smooth skins gleaming in the sun, but some of them had rough attachments on their sides, the cyborg modifications that made them machines of war.

"Those are Soviet military dolphins," Morgenstern said. "What are they doing in Manila Bay?"

Stasov shook his head. "None of my concern, now. Something for the Japanese and Americans to worry about."

"Why? Soviet forces have demobilized."

"They have. The Pacific Fleet is gone, the Japanese occupy Vladivostok, and there isn't a Red Army unit existing east of the Lena. But the dolphins aren't Soviet citizens, are they? And they have not signed any instrument of surrender." He sat back in his seat and straightened the knot on his tie.

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They had talked little about dolphins over the past two days. They had, instead, spoken mostly of space exploration, of Morgenstern's hopes and dreams, as if Stasov had come into her life to rescue her. As if he and his dolphins could somehow get her into space.

She looked out at the dolphins sliding in and out of the water and remembered the images from the TV: the flat burning shape of the Japanese aircraft carrier *Hiryu* at the Battle of La Perouse Strait and the vanishing prow of the *Aegis* cruiser *Jonathan Wainwright* as it failed to defend Kagalaska, both ships sunk by dolphins. The Soviets had been defeated, but the dolphins were still out there, and no one knew what they would do.

She looked at Colonel Ilya Sergeiivich Stasov, the Shark of Uglegorsk, and noticed that, for the first time since she had met him at Homma, he was smiling.

The Maldives, June 2029

Stasov clambered down over the slippery, seaweed-covered rocks to take a look at the octopus trapped in the tide pool. It had come too high up near shore at high tide, probably in pursuit of crabs to eat, and been imprisoned when the water receded. Snails and sea urchins tumbled helplessly as the octopus whirled its tentacles. The red starfish and the sea anemones clinging to the rocks on the side of the pool went calmly about their business, ignoring the frantic interloper. Stasov reached in and prodded the octopus with his finger. It flushed dark with fear and irritation and huddled down between two rocks. The overturned sea urchins waggled their spines and slowly began to right themselves.

The waves slapped louder as the tide rose over the rocks, gleaming eye-hurtingly in the glaring sunlight. Here and there the water met momentary resistance from a ridge or a seaweed pile, but it rose inexorably over all obstacles, finally pouring into the tide pool and reuniting it with the sea. The octopus jetted and vanished in the direction of deeper, safer waters.

Stasov climbed back up from the water, away from the heavy iodine smell of the dark seaweed. Isopods, those marine pill bugs, scuttled madly under his feet amid the barnacles and black lichens at the upper reach of the tidal zone. Above was the rough, bare rock where the sperm whale lay baking in the morning sun.

Its smooth black bulk loomed above the rough rock like a dream of a living mountain, sharply outlined against the cloudless sky. It had leaped from the sea sometime during the night and smashed itself on the land. Without help it would be dead by noon. Staring up at it, mesmerized,

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Stasov tripped over a stretch of the limp tubing that now crisscrossed the island. A firm hand grabbed his elbow and held him.

"We're ready to pump," Habib Williams's wheezy voice said. "Tubes are soft now, but under pressure they're like tree trunks. Get one of them wrapped around your leg and you got some trouble. Not to mention one leg fewer." Williams was a short, skinny man with a bald, brown head. His white suit was cut with precise jauntiness and he carried a flowered Japanese parasol. He peered at Stasov with narrow, obvious suspicion. "Now tell me. Why are we here?" He reached down with the parasol's crook and flipped the switch that was the only external feature of a satiny ovoid the size of a desk. It hummed, and seawater filled the tubing. Water sprayed out of hundreds of nozzles, played rainbows in the sun, and ran down the whale's sides.

Stasov gazed at him, pale blue eyes as featureless as robin's eggs. "We're saving a whale," he said. "That's your job, isn't it?"

Williams scowled. "It is. Cetacean rescue for the Indian Ocean. Fine, a respectable occupation, pleases my mother, though it means I can't get home much. I know my profession. What I don't know is why I, and Marta and Jolie and Ahmed, are *here,* on this tiny rock in the Maldives. The water is as clear and calm as I've ever seen it. There hasn't been even the hint of a storm in a month. Halcyon weather. This time of year we sit in a garden in Colombo and play cards. Marta usually wins. She claims it's skill."

He walked around the perimeter of the spray, stepping over the streams which now flowed in the cracks down to the sea. Stasov followed. On the other side of the whale were the two heavy-lift helicopters that had brought the rescue team from Sri Lanka. Next to them was Stasov's own aircraft, a tiny military surplus helicopter, its red star dimmed by sun and salt. Stasov thought of the red starfish in the tide pool. That helicopter had fought in the Aleutians, but its star now seemed to have an aquatic rather than a military character. Things did manage to change, sometimes. Ahmed and Jolie had set up a crane which curled over the sperm whale like a scorpion's tail.

"Then, this morning, the sun comes up, and the Indian Ocean seasearch satellite tells me there's a giant parmacety lying on the rocks in the middle of the ocean like a toy some god's child forgot. It happens. I've seen gams of whales beach themselves and pods of dolphins bash themselves against cliffs until the water is red. Sperm whales do reverse brodies and drop themselves on islands to die. I don't know why they do it, but I'm used to it. What I'm not used to is getting to the scene at top speed and finding Colonel Ilya Sergeiivich Stasov lying next to the whale, wrapped in a blanket, listening to the whale die."

"I hold no such rank," Stasov said sharply. His large hands tightened

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on each other. "The research vessel *Andrei Sakharov* has been in the Maldives for the past two weeks, not half an hour's flight from here, at Ihavandiffulu Atoll." Stasov had trouble pronouncing the outlandish word. "And she has been my station for two years."

"Oh, has she?" Williams said with heavy sarcasm. "And aren't you afraid you'll be sunk if you venture into the open sea? The sea has become a dangerous place, these days. I would assume for Soviet ships more than anyone."

"We've had no trouble." Stasov took a breath. "I heard a call on one of our hydrophone buoys. Two weeks ago. A deep call, out in the Arabian Basin. If you play back your recordings, you'll hear it. Three humpbacks, in close chorus. A simple call. It said 'The Bubble Is Rising.' It was a call to prayer. So I am here."

Williams stared at him, incredulous. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely." Stasov lifted his suntanned high-cheekboned face to the sky. "The Bubble Has Risen."

"Bullshit." Williams restrained his temper with a visible effort and turned away.

Stasov shook his head, knelt, and folded up his blanket. "The whale is dying. You want to play militia officer, interrogate me and throw me off your island. Understandable. But while we argue theology, the whale's mass is slowly crushing its lungs. Don't your people have the respirator ready yet?"

The cetacean rescuer jerked his parasol shut, snapping several of its delicate wooden ribs. Stasov followed him to the crane. Williams carefully removed his white suit and finally stood, in paunchy dignity, wearing only a pair of red bikini shorts. Stasov also stripped.

The two men stepped onto the crane and were lifted up to the whale's back, which was warm and smooth under their bare feet. They were immediately soaked by the spray that played over the whale.

Williams pulled the crane's respirator nozzle over to the whale's blowhole, located asymmetrically on the top left side of the snout. He stimulated the proper acupressure points with an ultrasonic probe, anaesthetizing the sensitive blowhole. He then inserted the nozzle and adjusted the suction cups that held it firm. A signal to Ahmed, and a rush of air inflated the whale's lungs.

"We can give him a breath of air, but we're going to lose him," Williams said. "A lot of damage down below where you can't see it. He must have done a world record jump, from the looks of it. Cracked ribs, organ ruptures, internal hemorrhaging. A mess. Is this poor dying thing your Bubble, Stasov?" He snorted in disgust. "Dolphin superstition. Another of their mass of stupid lies."

From the whale's back the two men could see the whole stretch of sea

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surrounding the island. Countless white splashes broke the otherwise calm water. Dolphins, hundreds of dolphins, were dancing in the sea. They surrounded the island out to the horizon. Williams stared out at them, his face twisted with disgust.

"We've heard many lies over the past few years," Stasov said, sweeping his arms at the dolphins. "The nature of dolphin Revelation isn't one of them."

"Are you asking me to accept the religion of those thugs?" Williams said. "Are they here to kill us? You." A sudden look of realization swept across his face. "They want to kill you. For what you did to them at Uglegorsk, and after."

Stasov shook his head slowly. "They know that I'm to live, for now. And when it is time for me to die, they'll let me handle it myself. Dolphins are capable of an elementary politeness. No, Mr. Williams, they are here to witness the rising of the Bubble. The Great Whale swims beneath the surface of reality, and the buffetings of Her flukes are the swirls and eddies of our lives. A sweep of Her fluke has thrown this sperm whale out of the sea. God rises to breathe. When She does, all will change."

"No, Stasov, I don't buy it." Williams looked as if he wanted to pace, but there wasn't room enough on the whale's slick back. "You pretend not to believe it, officially, but you know that the dolphins have been at war with the human race since the end of the Pacific War. They sank the cruise ship *Sagittarius* off Martinique. They've cut through the hulls of fishing vessels. They've killed swimmers in the open water. It's been random murder."

"Murder?" Stasov asked. "War? The actions of insane beasts? Which is it?"

"You've played your legal games all the way along. That's how you escaped punishment, and the way they will, too."

"The evidence that they've actually killed anyone is ambiguous."

"Ambiguous!" Williams's face turned red. "Colonel Stasov, pain and death are not ambiguous."

"That's quite true," Stasov said seriously. "I know. But whatever has happened, the Americans and the Japanese have been forced to negotiate at Santa Barbara, recognizing dolphin rights. As they should have done years ago, at the end of the Pacific War."

"This is your doing, damn you! You tortured them. Your cetacean research station at Uglegorsk ranks with Dachau and Auschwitz. I watched them die at Kagalaska. I was there."

Stasov breathed slowly. "It was a war. A war for survival." His voice was calm, almost dreamy. "But next time you give your diatribe, use some of our own Soviet concentration camps, such as Vorkuta and Kolyma, instead of those German ones. My grandfather died at Vorkuta.

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It lends a nice symmetry." So Williams had been at Kagalaska. Had he watched his comrades' blood crystallize on the blue rime ice and felt despair when the *Wainwright* sank?

"You tortured them and now you accept their faith?" Williams asked.

"I didn't know I was torturing them," Stasov said softly. "I didn't know. But without understanding their faith, we would never have been able to communicate with them at all."

"We'll talk with them at Santa Barbara. But you, thank God, won't be there."

"No. I am forbidden. I am a war criminal." Stasov shaded his eyes. Was she finally there, at the northern horizon? He watched as the huge white shape of the *Andrei Sakharov* pulled itself over the edge of the water. From this distance she looked pure, almost Japanese. Her rough welding and patched cables didn't show. "We want the whale, Mr. Williams." His voice was distant. "We intend to take it over from you."

"What?" Williams followed Stasov's gaze. His face hardened when he saw the ship with the red star on its prow. "Damn you, you can't have it."

"Is that your choice, Mr. Williams? The *Sakharov* is equipped with the full complement of systems for keeping the whale alive. It will die otherwise, within hours. You know that."

The *Sakharov* had once been an Aleksandr Brykin class nuclear-submarine tender with another name, and had loaded sea launched ballistic missiles into their launch tubes, missiles which, fortunately for the human race's survival, had never been fired.

"Better dead than in your hands," Williams shouted.

Stasov gestured, taking in the dolphin-filled sea visible from the whale's back. "The dolphins don't seem to agree with you."

"Fuck the dolphins! They probably want to haul the whale into the ocean so they can rape it." He ran a hand over his scalp, gaining control of himself. "No. I can't do it. It will imperil the treaty negotiations at Santa Barbara." He smiled, pleased at this legalistic solution. "If we turned a whale over to Colonel Ilya Sergei—"

"I'm glad you take so much trouble to pronounce my entire name," Stasov said icily. "But who is being legalistic now? Unless we intervene, the whale will die." He paused, in wonder at the threat he was about to utter. He had long ago resolved to put the military behind himself. "The *Sakharov* took on a platoon of Russian troops when we resupplied at Karachi a week ago. We are taking them to Oman. I think they would be willing to assist us in saving this whale's life."

Williams stared out at the approaching ship. "You don't give me any choice," he said stonily.

"Choice is usually an illusion."

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The aerobody had developed a noticeable list to starboard and vibrated vigorously, as if drilling through air suddenly solid. The airship's pilot, Benjamin Fliegle, took a slow sip of the steaming green tea in his stoneware cup and set it back in its heated, gimbaled holder on the control board. The sleet was heavy outside, and the windshield wiper, inadequately heated, stuttered under a thick layer of ice. Fliegle, his small shaven head perched on top of his orange saffron robe like a potato on a pumpkin, leaned forward and pounded on the windshield with his fist. The wiper tossed a chunk of wet ice and moved more smoothly. The aerobody tilted perilously and he grabbed the wheel. "Pesky thing," he muttered.

The rear hatch opened and admitted a figure in heavy insulation, as well as a blast of wet, freezing air.

"How does it look?" Fliegle said.

"Not bad," Olivia Knester said as she stripped her suit off. "Just noisy. I'll overhaul it in the shop when we get back to Kushiro, but it won't give us any trouble now." Now naked, Knester also pulled on an orange saffron robe. She was a chunky, middle-aged woman with extravagant curled eyebrows which tried to compensate for the shaved skull above them. "However, Benjamin . . . "

"Yes, Olivia?"

"The engine isn't buying your theories about the virtual identities of reciprocating parts. It will not 'wear into perfection,' it will wear into junk. Keep the crankcase oil full. Until we achieve satori and leave the Wheel, we must keep it lubricated." She turned to Stasov. "Put on your suit. We should find the proper pod of orcas soon. Benjamin, it's time to start listening."

Fliegle dropped the aerobody's altitude to fifty feet and cut back the engines until they moved at twenty miles an hour. A lever on the panel released the hydrophone. As Stasov pulled on his wetsuit, Fliegle put in his earphones and leaned back in his seat with his eyes closed. The altitude continued to drop.

"Benjamin!" Knester said sharply.

The nose went back up. "Sorry."

Stasov put on his fins, fitted underwater lenses into his eyes, and snugged the oxygenator onto the valves on his neck. Then he attached the microphone to his throat, strapped the transducer and signal processor to his chest, and activated the bone conduction speakers behind his jaw hinge. Orca speech included frequencies from 5 Hz to 80 kHz, far beyond the range of human hearing. His equipment compressed and processed the information so that he could communicate.

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Sitting on the rocky peninsula of Shiretoko Hanto, communicating with the notoriously touchy orcas, had left the esoteric Buddhist monks of Yumeji Monastery unconcerned with human things. Fortunately this attitude encompassed Stasov's own past, so he had received even-handed treatment. The monks reassured him. Everyone wanted to escape the Wheel, but everyone was bound to it. Death, in the dolphin view, was the only possible escape, an escape the Buddhists did not permit themselves. Stasov found himself more dolphin than Buddhist.

"I hear him," Fliegle said. Knester nodded at Stasov, and the double bay doors swung open.

He stepped out, tucked, and fell through the gray and vaporous air, then smacked painfully into a cresting wave. As the water closed over his face, reflexes drilled into his autonomic nervous system took over. His diaphragm ceased to inflate his lungs, in a conditioned apnea, and he began to derive oxygen from his carotid gill connections.

He listened to the chatter in his earphones, sorting signals from noise. A long descending note rumbled, found the resonant frequencies of his joints, and intensified until his entire body was in pain. An orca's shout could break bones, rupture internal organs, and fill the lungs with blood. The orca's voice died away, then sounded deeper, and he was suddenly filled with unreasoning terror. Orcas' voices could kill, or they could stimulate a fear response, pump adrenalin into the human bloodstream, and race the human heart. Cetacean tricks were old to Stasov. Somewhere inside his mind a stopcock opened, the dark waters of fear drained, and he was calm again.

"Greetings, Stasov," a cool voice said. It used the sliding tones of the simple orca dialect used for speaking to children, or humans. The voice was familiar. Where had he heard it before? "Thou hast words to speak. Speak them then, for thoughts must be herded and swallowed, lest they escape to the open sea." Of course.

"It is a long way from Kagalaska, Bottom-Thumper," Stasov said, using the slightly contemptuous nickname this orca had earned for his childhood habit of bumping the hulls of Japanese fishing boats. "I trust your hunger has been stayed?"

"My hunger is infinite. But thou art still spoiled food. I must content myself with swallowing the minds of men, leaving their bodies to the sharks and fishes."

"Are you still chasing prime numbers?" Stasov asked.

"I am. I taste the fins of the Goldbach Conjecture. Soon I will sink my teeth into it. It shall not escape."

Bottom-Thumper was a highly respected mathematician, both among humans and orcas. Dolphins, on the other hand, had no interest what-

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soever in mathematics. "Your prey weakens," Stasov said politely.

"Do not seek to distract me with minnows. Let loose thy desires and get thee from my sea!" The thunder of Bottom-Thumper's voice buzzed in Stasov's ribs. He hung alone in darkness, only the speed of Bottom-Thumper's replies indicating the orca's proximity.

"The Bubble Has Risen," Stasov said. "We have the Foreswimmer, the whale that signals the coming of God's Echo. We want to take him out of this sea, and let him swim in the deeper waters of the planet Jupiter. I ask you to allow this and to make the proposal in your negotiations at Santa Barbara."

Absurd and makeshift, it somehow all fit together, the only way Stasov had found out of the trap he had placed himself in. Unfortunately, it involved putting himself here in the black water, making a request which could cost him his life. Cost him his life much too soon.

"Do I hear the echo of thy guilt, Stasov?" the orca asked. "I detect its ancient fleeting shape in thy voice. Thou art foolish, as men are wont to be. Thy crimes were necessary and thus were not crimes at all. Thou may live or die, as thou thyself choose. Does an orca need to tell that to a human?"

"Is this prey then released to our jaws?" Stasov asked formally, ignoring the orca's reasoning.

"It is," Bottom-Thumper replied. "But ye humans know not the swift current that has seized you. We shall provide a guard to windward: who will be the Echo of God."

"The Messiah," Stasov said in shock.

"Thy term, inadequate and misleading, but it will do."

He had expected the orca to insist on providing an intelligent cetacean as escort to the sperm whale, whose intelligence was about that of a great ape, but had not expected the Messiah himself. It all made sense, though. It all fit together. "We will make the proper arrangements. It will not be easy. We have never taken a cetacean into space before. For an orca—"

"Not an orca! The voice of God echoes without speaking and the Echo is not an orca!" Bottom-Thumper was suddenly in a high rage, his syllables ragged like fish with their heads bitten off. The orca spoke in an odd grammatical tense, that was used either to describe dreams, or make statements so true they were apodictic, such as 'all things die' or 'before my conception I did not exist.' Stasov could barely follow the grammar.

"Watch your rectum," Stasov said in dolphin, recalling the insult he had made to Bottom-Thumper when they first met in the bloody waters off Kagalaska. "The walrus is still awaiting your pleasure."

The orca went silent for a long moment. "I should have eaten thee then, Stasov, in that swarming, evil-tasting sea. But my belly was full of men. For the last time, I fear. Thou hast the Foreswimmer, a wounded

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sperm whale ye wish to lift to Jupiter, a planet none of us sea dwellers has ever seen. God's Remora must accompany the whale, for the Time of the Breath is near. Go now to the Aegean Dolphin Sanctuary. There is thy goal. And much good luck may thou and all thy fellow humans have with whom thee will find there."

And then he laughed. And laughed. And *laughed,* a sound like an immense train at a grade crossing. Razor-edged, their thoughts suffused with blood even as they reasoned their way through the most subtle philosophies, bitter thinkers on the end of all, dispensers of justice and death, orcas laughed long, hard, and often. Bottom-Thumper's laughter stopped.

"Art thou willing to pay the price?"

"I am, whatever it is." Stasov could not slow the pounding of his heart.

"Float out thy limbs and remain still. Well met then, Ilya Sergeiivich Stasov."

Stasov relaxed his arms and legs and floated spread-eagled. Suddenly, silently, the smooth shape of the orca sped by, thirty feet long, black, powerful, and vanished again.

The pain was as sudden as the smash of an ax. Stasov twisted his body in agony and managed to activate the buoyancy harness. It righted him and carried him to the surface. He spit water, gasped in the cold air, and was finally able to scream.

The aerobody floated overhead in the pewter sky, a blunt-nosed wedge with two propellers flickering aft. It turned lazily around and drifted over him, buzzing like an immense insect. A harness lowered and scooped him up delicately. The sea opened around him. He looked down. Scarlet drops of blood fell past his dangling feet, the only flecks of color against the gray of the sea and sky. A six-foot-long hooked dorsal fin cut the surface of the water. The orca's head was just visible, water flowing over it in a smooth layer. Bottom-Thumper spouted once and vanished.

Knester was ready with salve and bandages. "Such accuracy," she said admiringly. "He charged a price only a human could pay."

"Damn him," Stasov said through clenched teeth.

"Don't be such a baby. A wound like this is a compliment. Usually an orca will smash you with a fluke, toss you in the air, or puncture your eardrum by shouting when making an exchange, to show his contempt. A blood price is a genuine honor, but usually involves death or maiming for life. The spinning of the Wheel is beyond our knowledge, so I can't guess why he thought you deserved such delicacy."

"We're old friends," Stasov said. She was right. It wasn't every man who was charged a blood price by an orca and ended up losing only the last two fingers on his left hand.

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Erika Morgenstern forged grimly up the street into the teeth of the wind. Huge rafts of dirty ice thrust up out of the Neva River, revealing black water beneath a quickly freezing scum.

The dark granite blocks of the embankment held the elegant Baroque city out of the greedy water. Despite the cold, she paused, to marvel at the golden spire of the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul as it rose above the frozen city.

Ilya Stasov was housed in an eerily beautiful eighteenth-century red-stucco building with white pilasters, vivid against the snow. Two guards in bulky greatcoats, rifles slung across their shoulders, checked her papers before unlocking the door.

"You have been meeting at the Institute for Space Research?" one of them asked, a friendly youngster with straight flaxen hair sticking out from under his fur cap. "That is good. We have long waited for the Americans to ask for our help. We are smart, but poor."

That wasn't quite it, of course, and she was from New Zealand, not America, but Morgenstern wasn't about to argue with him. Instead, she smiled back. "Yes. We're going to Jupiter." She wasn't sure she believed it herself, but the agreement had been signed just that morning.

"Together, ah? That's the only way to go so far." He opened the door for her and saluted.

The hall was dark, and like all Russian hallways smelled of cabbage, this time with an overtone of frankincense from the icon lamp that glowed in the corner.

Typewriters clacked somewhere in the rear. She only belatedly identified a low moaning as a recording of a humpbacked whale call. A silent, suspicious woman, her hair tied severely back, led Morgenstern up the stairs to the front of the house.

Stasov greeted her with a formal triple cheek kiss. She held on to him for a moment longer. He had put on weight since Homma, but was still thin. "It is good to see you," he said. "Have you succeeded?" His hair was shaved close, like a swimmer's. He looked tired, and had circles under his eyes.

"Yes," she said. She thought about the years of effort that had finally brought her here to Leningrad. "We're going. In principle. As to your idea about our funding . . . "

The silent woman brought two glasses of strong tea. Stasov sweetened his with a teaspoon of blackberry jam. His left hand was no longer bandaged, and he held his glass with his thumb and first two fingers. "It is not a joke. The Delphine Delegation will provide the funding, as they have agreed at Santa Barbara."

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"But why? To haul a maimed sperm whale off to Jupiter? It doesn't make any sense!"

"I have told you, though you choose not to accept it. It marks the arrival of their God. If you don't understand that, of course it doesn't make any sense."

"God save us from religion." She felt a deep sense of frustration. "I feel like I'm being financed by some dotty maiden aunt who wants her Pekinese to see Jupiter."

He tapped the rim of his glass with his spoon. "This maiden aunt will have billions of dollars in reparation money from the Santa Barbara agreement. That money is as good as any other. It is the only way you will succeed."

"I understand that. But I don't have to like it."

"None of us have to like what we have to do." A bell rang in the next room. "Excuse me," he said. "That's Vladivostok." He walked out, slumped, his limbs heavy. He looked infinitely tired.

She looked around as she listened to his low voice on the phone. The room was packed with papers. Diagrams and maps covered the elaborately figured wallpaper. The lion-footed desk was covered with strip charts and sonograms. A small bed, severely made in a military manner, was the only clear area. A heavy red folder lay on the desk. In a mood of idle curiosity, Morgenstern flipped it open. 'Minutes—Santa Barbara negotiations,' it said. The date was yesterday's. She flipped through. Every day of the negotiations, supposedly kept under rigid security, was there, extensively marked and annotated in Stasov's angular hand. She closed the notebook and sat back down in her chair.

Stasov's voice continued. She listened to it, but couldn't make out the words. After a moment, she realized that he wasn't speaking English or Russian. He was speaking a dolphin dialect. The . . . person on the other end of the line was not a human being.

"Did the dolphins fight a war with us?" she asked when he returned.

"With whom?"

"Don't be coy with me, Ilya!" she said heatedly. "Did they sink ships, those veterans of yours?"

"Until the Treaty of Santa Barbara is signed, the war between human and cetacean will continue, as it always has. It's simply that recently the struggle has been a trifle more even. That's all I will say."

"What do you have to do with Santa Barbara?"

He glanced at the red folder. "I'm not permitted to have anything to do with Santa Barbara. But I like to stay informed."

"How do you hold all this in your head? The whale . . . you might have started another war when you took it from the Indian Ocean people by force."

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"I had to do it," Stasov said. "There was no other way. It's a step on the way out."

"Did you see all this, when we met at Homma?"

"I saw the sun. I saw freedom. I saw that I still had to live. I felt my redemption, but did not yet see its shape. There are still a number of things I have to do. Some of them frighten me."

"Did you see me, Ilya?" she asked, with a feeling of constriction in her throat. "Have you ever seen me? Or just what I can do?"

"I saw you, Erika. But I saw myself as well. Don't try to force me into a position I do not hold. You understand better than anyone what it is that I'm after."

She sighed. "You don't look well, Ilya. Do you sleep?"

"Poorly. Nightmares."

"Of course," she said. "Homma."

"No," he answered. "Uglegorsk."

The Aegean Sea, April 2031

The cliffs rose up a thousand feet above the water, encircling the twenty-mile-wide harbor like protective arms. Whitewashed villages clung to the cliff tops, glinting in the morning sunlight. The sky was a vivid, cloudless blue. Stasov leaned back against the mast, feeling it warm on his back. The *St. John Chrysostom* creaked serenely across the still water in the harbor. His guide, Georgios Theodoros, silently trimmed the boat's bright sail. It billowed out in the breeze and they began to flop over the water. Soon they had emerged from the bay of Thera onto the open waters of the Aegean Sea.

"They call it the Temple of Poseidon Pankrator," Theodoros said. He rested easily at the stern of the boat, bearded face turned to the sun like a cat's, eyes half closed while he kept one arm over the tiller. "Poseidon, Ruler of All. Wishful thinking, attributing ancient supremacy to the Sea God. He ruled the sea, and horses. Not much else. But the Temple *is* the only structure this near which survived the eruption of the volcano Strogyle, that black day four thousand years ago, so perhaps Poseidon took it back to his bosom." That eruption had left behind the harbor of Thera, which was the immense caldera of the collapsed volcano.

It had been years since Stasov had seen Theodoros. The Greek had aged gracefully, gray appearing in his beard. He had gained a certain unpleasant notoriety due to the association of his theories with Stasov's infamous work at Uglegorsk, but he showed no hurt or anger. In his home waters he was quite an eccentric. Though the regulations governing the Aegean dolphin territories prohibited the use of noisy motor-driven

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vessels, they certainly did not require the hand-built wood hull blackened with pitch, the dyed woven linen sail, and the watchful painted eyes on the *St. John Chrysostom*'s prow.

"I never guessed what it would take," Theodoros said. "All my studies, and I never understood."

"I never guessed how much it would cost," Stasov replied. "But without you I would never have figured anything out."

Theodoros looked out over the sea. "It may have been a mistake, Ilya. But of course that's absurd. We had to discover their intelligence. If only . . . "

"If only they weren't a contemptible, corrupt, sexually perverse bunch of braggarts, cowards, and fools?" Stasov snorted. It was now proverbial that the more one studied dolphins, the more one disliked them. "Why didn't your ancient sources mention that?"

"They mention it, but obliquely. The humans of that era were perhaps not much different, and didn't see that it deserved much comment."

"But how did *they* figure it out?" Stasov asked in wonder. "That was four thousand years ago! They had no sound generators, no signal processing laboratories. How did the men of the Cretan Thalassocracy learn to speak to dolphins?"

"You've got it backwards. I think dolphins learned to talk from humans, being too pigheaded to think of something like that on their own, just like the unlettered Greeks learned civilization from the Cretans."

"Learned?" Stasov said. "Or were compelled to learn?"

"Did the ancient Cretans enslave dolphins to guide their ships into dangerous harbors, assist in salvage operations, and scout out enemy defenses? Most likely. I doubt, however, that they felt any great guilt at having done so."

"But still." Stasov hit the wooden gunwale with his fist. "To sail out in a ship like this, dive into the water, and learn to speak to an animal. It's incredible. The equipment we used, the time . . . "

"Don't underestimate your own achievement, Ilya. In ancient days, remember, the dolphins had not resolved to be silent. Breaking that resolution was the difficult thing."

"Difficult," Stasov said, eyes downcast. "That's one word for it."

Theodoros ignored his companion's sudden gloom. "And we were all closer to nature then, and the gods. Remember that story about the lyre player, the whale, and the dolphin that I told you back at Uglegorsk? A whale was more than a whale. He was the Foreswimmer, he who comes before, the First Bubble that rises from the spout of God to foretell the coming Breath, the new incarnation. The dolphin over whose dim head our singer broke his lyre is the Echo of God, or as others have termed

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him, God's Remora, Her humble, material associate, the Messiah. And that brings us here."

"Whatever happened to that dolphin?" Stasov asked. "After he guided the priests to Delphi."

"Did he die, his task finished?" Theodoros shrugged, looking closely at Stasov. "The story doesn't say. Dolphins perceive the universe by sensing sounds they generate themselves. This makes them arrogant, as if they define the universe, and their final arrogance is their belief that they can finish what they have to do, find closure, and die, achieving completion. Fortunately humans, dependent on the world outside themselves, are incapable of such a self-satisfied attitude."

Stasov turned away. "After four thousand years, they tell me, the Messiah has been born. The orcas are angry that he is not of their number but otherwise don't seem to find it much of a matter for comment."

"Why should they? He is a material Messiah, immanent, not transcendent. A money changer. A Pharisee. Even dolphin theology is crude and stupid."

That made Stasov smile. "At last we've found your pet peeve, Georgios. Lack of theological rigor."

"Don't laugh, you're the one who has to deal with it. So you want to push these lazy, incompetent creatures to the Time of the Breath. Why?"

"I shattered their silence, and now I forever hear their voices. If I bring on the Breath, and they reach their new incarnation, perhaps I can find peace."

Theodoros looked sorrowful. "You won't, Ilya. You never will. Peace is only within. But here we are." He dropped sail and the boat stilled. No land was visible. A buoy marked the shallows where the Temple lay. "Into the sea with you. Seek the Messiah. I will await your return here." He smiled sunnily at Stasov, who sat, motionless, staring at the smoothly shining water.

"You have to face them," Theodoros said. "You have madly driven this far. How can you stop?"

"I can't. I always want to, but I can't." Stasov put on his fins and slipped into the water. Dolphins commented to each other somewhere in the distance, but the water around him was empty. He swam towards the voices, recognizing them. Bottom-Thumper at Hokkaido, and these three here. Who else?

In a few moments he came into sight of the Temple of Poseidon Pankrator. Buried by volcanic ash and millennia of bottom sediment, the Temple had been lost until a sounding survey detected a density anomaly. After negotiation with the Delphine Delegation it had been cleaned and restored. A forest of the distinctive Cretan columns, wider at the top than at the bottom, held up a roof edged with stylized bull's horns.

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Everything had been repainted its original bright polychrome, the columns red with green capitals, the bull's horns gleaming with gold. The Temple was used as a symbolic site for formal human-dolphin negotiations, since it had been from the men of the Cretan Thalassocracy that dolphins had first learned the habits of speech.

Stasov swam slowly over the old sacred precincts, tracing out the lines of the religious complex of which the Temple of Poseidon Pankrator had once been the center. The rest of the ruins had been cleared of debris and left just as they were. In front of the Temple was a large open area. This had once been the Sacred Pool, where dolphins had swum to pay homage, with the sullen sarcasm that must even then have been part of their personalities, to the humans' anthropomorphic version of the Sea God.

Three dolphins swam fitfully around the Temple. The sun probed through the water and gleamed on the ultrasonic cutting blades that made up the front edges of their flippers and dorsal fins. Their sides were armored and their bellies packed with superconducting circuitry. They turned and swam towards him in attack formation. Phobos, Deimos, and Harmonia. A coincidence, that those three had survived. The children of Aphrodite, wife of the cuckolded artificer Hephaestos, and Ares the War God. Fear, Panic, and Harmony, the contradictory emotions of Love and War, with a healthy assist from sullenly impartial technology.

"Colonel!" Deimos said, and the dolphins stopped, awaiting orders. They would still obey him, he knew. If he commanded them to cut Theodoros's boat apart, they would do it without a moment's hesitation, despite the treaty violation it would entail. His authority over them would always exist, for they knew he had the power to change the shape of the world, a power that caused them agony and terror.

Stasov ran his maimed left hand down Deimos's side, feeling the scars and machinery. In the war's second year Deimos and a dozen of his fellows had preceded a run of Soviet attack submarines from Murmansk through the perilous sea gap between Greenland and Iceland, where the enemy had placed his most sensitive submarine detection technology. Packed with equipment which made them appear to all sensors as Alfa class submarines, the dolphins had drawn ASW forces away from the real Soviet attack. Five of the nine submarines had gotten through, to provide a useful diversion of enemy forces from the main theater of war in the North Pacific. Deimos alone of his comrades had survived, and been decorated with an Order of Lenin.

"I am not a Colonel," Stasov said. He was tired of saying it.

"What are you then?" Harmonia said. Her artificial left eye glittered at him, its delicate Japanese optics covered with seaweed and algae. "An orca that walks?"

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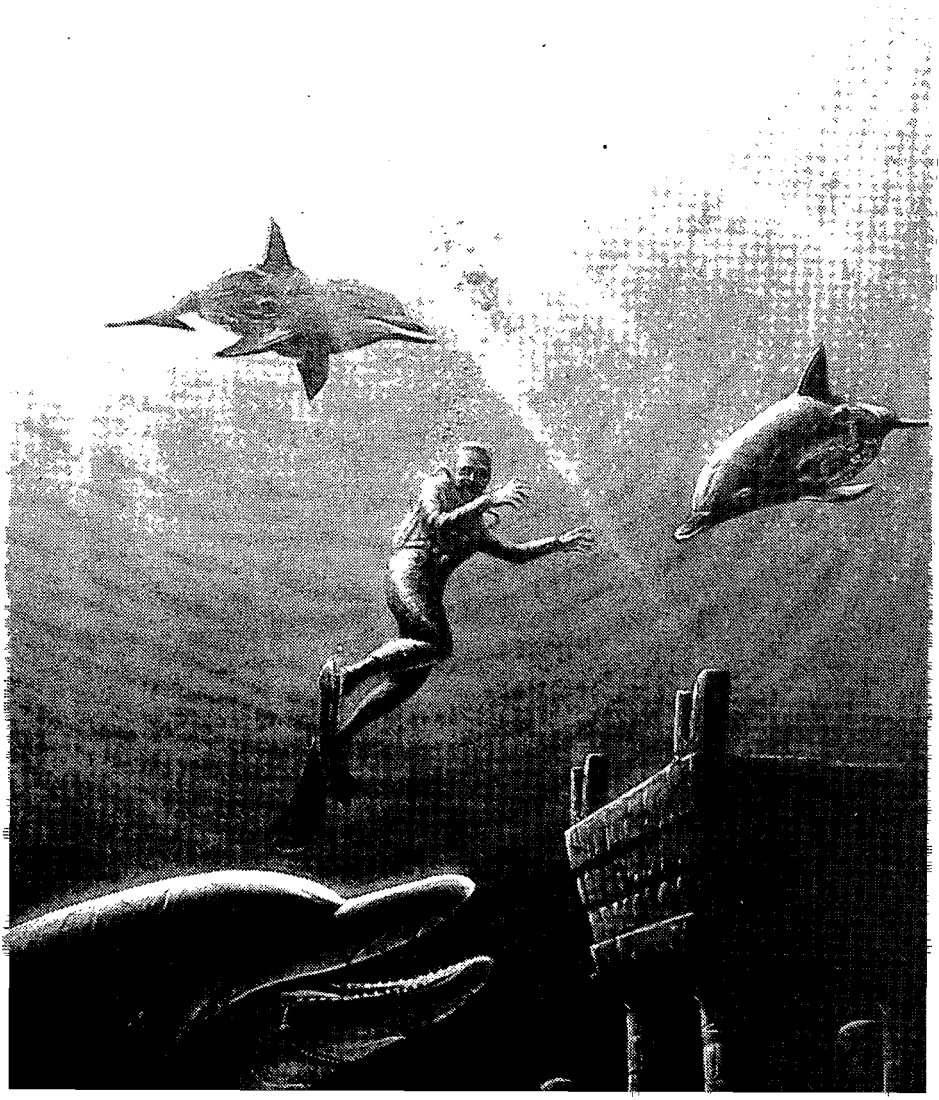

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"An orca with hands," Phobos agreed. "A good definition of a human." He was the largest of the three and had gotten through the war miraculously unscathed. "We know what you want. You want God. That's why you're still alive."

"Why the hell do you care?" Harmonia made a thrumming noise indicative of disgust. "Why should we?" Her eye kept twisting and focusing at nothing. She had lost the left side of her skull during the landings at Kagalaska. Her job had been cutting free mines with her ultrasonic fin blades while suppressing their magnetic detection circuitry. At Kagalaska the dolphins had encountered a new model. Stasov had never figured out how Harmonia had managed to survive. "Why have you dragged us here to do this? I'm bored."

"He wants to hurt us more," Deimos said. "This way he can drive *all* of us. He will use the Remora like a narwhal's tusk. He will pierce us. Isn't that true, Colonel?"

"It's true," Stasov said. "But it doesn't matter. It has no effect on the validity of my request."

"Stop knocking a dead body around with your snout," the massive Phobos said. "Save logical games for the orcas, who like them. They bore us."

The three dolphins' voices sank through the water like lumps of lead. Each phrase seemed a deliberate effort, but that did not silence them.

"I'm not playing games," Stasov said. "I am serious."

"But why do you care?" cried Harmonia.

"I do. I always have."

Phobos swam up and knocked Stasov aside as if he were a vagrant piece of seaweed. Three chevrons, now dark and tarnished, marked his dorsal fin, one for each of the American submarines whose destruction had been attributable to his skillful use of his sonic and magnetic detectors. He had also helped sink the American *Aegis* cruiser *Wainwright,* saving the landings on Kagalaska

Even now, his side bruised, Stasov felt that same surge of gratitude that had overcome him when he watched the cruiser sink into the North Pacific. "Answer her question," Phobos said. "Why do you care?"

Harmonia did not allow Stasov to answer. "*We* certainly don't. God talk is stupid."

"God will rise when She wants to," Deimos said. "We can't push Her flippers with our snouts."

They circled Stasov like mechanical, murderous sharks.

"Tell us why this matters to you," Phobos roared.

Would they slice him apart with their ultrasonic blades, these decorated veterans of that heroic, futile war, and stain the clear water with his blood? He felt like a man returned to the grave of his comrades, only

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to have their bony hands reach out from death to pull him beneath the surface. He would welcome their cold touch, because he knew they had the right.

"It matters because it has to happen," Stasov said. "It is necessary."

The dolphins hooted contempt. "You always do what is necessary, Colonel," Deimos said. "You tortured us until you ripped the voice from our throats—because it was necessary. You took away our bodies and turned us into mechanical sharks—because it was necessary. You killed us in your incomprehensible human war—because it was necessary. Now you come to tear us from the womb of our sea and throw us into the cold deeps of space *because it is necessary*?"

"Eating is necessary," Harmonia said. "Fucking is necessary. Breathing is necessary. Death is necessary. You're as stupid as a sea turtle that fucks in the sea and then climbs out into the air to lay its eggs where the land dwellers can steal them. I'm sure the turtle thinks it's necessary."

"You're like a shark maddened by the smell of blood," Phobos said, suddenly quiet, "who eats and eats and can't stop until its belly bursts. Won't you ever have your fill of us, Ilya Stasov?"

Crying under water seemed so maddeningly futile. He reached his arms out to them, a meaningless gesture. But what could he give them? An apology? A confession?

"You are right," he said. "I need to do it so that at last I can rest. I can try to forget what I have done to you."

"Rest," Deimos said. "A human word." Dolphins slept with only one hemisphere of their brains at a time so that they could always keep swimming. They could never stop, because they had to breathe. "Why should we grant it to you? The Treaty does not require it."

"And if the Treaty does not require it," Phobos added, "we will not do it. Name us the proper articles or leave."

"Brothers," Harmonia said, suddenly quiet. "Stasov wishes to die. He cannot until he is finished."

"Yes," Stasov said. "Give me your Messiah. And let me die."

Uglegorsk, June 2031

It was the scene of his nightmares. The tanks were now empty, the floor dry, the electronics long since packed up and discarded, but the high vault of the laboratory still contained all of the pain and terror that Stasov could imagine. From the platform where he stood the pattern of tanks on the floor looked like an ice cube tray in an abandoned refrig-

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erator. The vault's concrete was cracked and aging, the color of long-buried bone.

Stasov held tightly to the thin metal railing though there was no danger of falling. Even empty the building whispered. The Japanese had long ago given up on the idea of turning the Uglegorsk station into an atrocity museum. It was too far from anywhere, and the torment there had not involved blood or physical torture but pain too subtle for a human to see. They concluded that the museum would have been utterly unvisited. So it had lain empty, until Stasov's irregular request for a last look at it.

The Japanese had been extraordinarily polite and cooperative, and had left Stasov to wander on his own through the ruins. Perhaps, Stasov thought, it was because they knew he could punish himself more effectively than they had ever been able to.

Suddenly something thunked on the metal stairs. Stasov shivered. Was the place really haunted? The thunk became regular, and Stasov heard the heavy breathing of someone pulling himself up the stairs.

A large figure loomed out of the darkness. "Ilya," he said. "It's been a long time."

"Antosha!" Stasov embraced the massive Anatoly Ogurtsov and kissed him. He hadn't seen the General since the middle of the war. Veterans of Uglegorsk never spoke to each other, even if they lived in the same town. The slightest word would have shattered the icy barriers they had set up around that time. Stasov suspected he knew why the other was there. Ogurtsov would ask a question, eventually. Stasov only hoped that he would be able to answer it.

Ogurtsov stepped back. His right foot was a prosthetic. When he noticed Stasov's attention, he slapped it with his cane. "Not an orca, unfortunately," he rumbled. "Nothing appropriate like that. A single bullet through the knee at Unimak. An ordinary soldier's wound." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a vodka bottle. He pulled the stopper out with his teeth and offered it to Stasov. "To old times."

"To old times," Stasov responded, and took a swallow. He almost choked.

Ogurtsov chuckled. "Now don't insult me, Ilya. I make that stuff myself. An old man's hobby. Flavored with buffalo grass."

"It's excellent," Stasov managed to choke, tears in his eyes.

"Have you lost your taste for vodka?" Ogurtsov laughed. "I remember," he gestured with his cane at the tanks below, "how we sat, you, me, and that Greek philosopher, Theodoros, and unriddled the ways of the dolphins. The drunker we got, the more sense we made of their myths and their gods. And we figured it out."

"And we did it. We tortured them until they spoke."

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Ogurtsov regarded him warily. "How were we to know? How should we have realized the incredibly strong response of the cetacean brain to the sense of sound? The aural illusions we generated for them tormented them, drove them mad. It's as if those optical illusions you find in children's books drove humans to extremes of agony."

"We didn't know," Stasov whispered. "For months, years, we tortured them with illusions of moving seabeds, of impossible echoes. Their absolute faith in their senses broke them like dry sticks in our hands."

"It was a long time ago," Ogurtsov said. He put his arm around Stasov's shoulders. "Let's get out of here."

They climbed down the stairs and walked among the crumbling tanks. "Remember the first time one of them spoke?" Stasov said.

"Ilya, please—"

"Do you remember?"

Ogurtsov shook himself. "Of course I remember." He paused by a tank and looked in at its cracked and stained bottom. "There were four of us. You, me, Sadnikova, and Mikulin. Mikulin died last year, did you know? He tripped and fell down in the snow. He was drunk. He froze to death.

"I can see it. Sadnikova stood over there, her hands on the signal generator. I stood here, you next to me. Mikulin on the other side. It was our final, most sophisticated sonic pattern. The eruption of Strogyle and the sinking of the sea bottom. We'd spent months on it. We played it for that one we called Kestrel, because he swam so fast. I don't know what—"

"He died in the Battle of La Perouse Strait."

"So he got his wish at last." Ogurtsov grabbed onto the edge of the tank. "We played the illusion. And he cried out—"

" 'Let—me—die'," Stasov said through clenched teeth. "That's what he finally screamed. 'Let me die!' " He shivered. "That's how we began to talk."

"We never listened to what they said, you know. We made them talk, but we never listened. We've never understood why they want to die."

They walked through the rest of the building silently. At the back door they stopped. The sky had its usual high overcast. The *Sterlet,* the boat from the Vladivostok Oceanographic Institute, floated just off shore, its gaily fluttering red flag the only spot of color against the sea and sky. It was the vessel that would take Stasov to Vladivostok, finally back in Russian hands. From there he would go to Tyuratam, and from the spaceport there to Jupiter.

"They fought a war against us, didn't they?" Ogurtsov said. "And most of the human race never really believed it. The slimy aquatic bastards."

"Yes," Stasov answered. "They did. They sank ferry boats, pleasure craft, fishing boats. Whenever they knew they wouldn't get caught, whenever events would be confused. Terrorism, plain and simple."

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Ogurtsov shook his head. "We trained them well. Phobos probably sank more than his share. He was a mean one."

"I don't doubt it."

They went down to the water and strolled along the rocky shore, letting the waves lap against their feet. Ogurtsov maneuvered easily over the rocks, occasionally kicking a loose one with his prosthetic foot. He looked at Stasov. "I've talked to people in Leningrad. You've gotten everything. Everything we hid. Why do you want it?"

Stasov did not return his glance. The question had finally come. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ilya!" Ogurtsov took his shoulder, his hand massive. Stasov stopped. "You've cleaned out the black files, the ones the War Crimes Commission was always after. Circuit diagrams, sonic structures, echo formats. All the ways we generated those sonic images, and the effects that they had. The recordings of dolphins in pain. All of our results." He shook Stasov's shoulder. "I thought most of it had been destroyed."

"No," Stasov said. "We never throw anything away. You know that, Antosha."

"No one knows that stuff exists. The Japanese suspected, the yellow bastards, but they couldn't get their hands on it. They tried hard enough to open you up."

"They tried. I learned more from them than they did from me."

"Why do you want that stuff? After what we've been through? We never wanted to have anything to do with it ever again."

"I don't *want* it," Stasov said. "I've never wanted it. But I need it."

Ogurtsov stopped, as immovable as a mountain, holding Stasov in his grip. "Ilya, I feel guilty. We all do, each in our own way, some, I grant you, more than others. But we try to forgive ourselves, because we didn't know what we were doing. What gives you the right to think that your guilt is more important than anyone else's?"

"I know what I have to do, Antosha. That's all. I'm not trying to compete with you."

Ogurtsov dropped his hand, letting him go. "Do it then," he said, his voice tired. "Do it and be damned."

Jupiter Orbit, January 2033

Weissmuller pumped his way towards Jupiter Forward. His entire body ached with fatigue. He'd never swum so far before, and he couldn't stop to take a rest. That was all right. The universe was really not such a big place after all. Surgically implanted physiological indicators buzzed into his bones, frantically warning him that Jupiter's magnetic field was

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about to give him a radiation overdose. The medical personnel at Jupiter Forward had warned him strictly. He belched in contempt. What was the problem? Humans were always afraid of all sorts of things they couldn't see or hear. The problem of ionizing radiation was too bizarre and subtle to interest Weissmuller. It could be taken care of. Humans liked solving things like that. That was what humans were for.

Though he accepted it as his due, Weissmuller's spacesuit was a marvel. It followed his contours closely. Since dolphins cannot see upwards, the head dome was clear on the underside of the head only, revealing the slyly grinning jaws. The suit circulated water around the dolphin's body while hugging it closely to prevent bruising his tender dolphin skin. The microwave array thrust up between the oxygen tanks on either side of his dorsal fin.

Myoelectric connections to Weissmuller's swimming muscles operated his suit rockets, so that his motions in space were the same as they were in the water. The powerful movements of his tail operated thrust rockets; his fins fired steering rockets. A velocity dependent retro-rocket simulated the resistance of water, slowing him if he ceased to thrust with his tail. He was kept stable by automatic sightings on the fixed stars which washed around him like sea foam.

Weissmuller felt a resonant self-satisfaction. All the way down to Io and back! Jupiter and its satellites floated around him like diatoms. His echo-location signals told him that Ganymede and Jupiter were each about five kilometers away, since the microwave signals took seven seconds to get to them and back. He knew that the distance was actually much greater, but the illusion was powerful, giving him the feeling that the Jovian system could have been dropped into the Aegean Sea and lost. Even the most distant satellite, Sinope, seemed a mere hundred twenty kilometers from Jupiter.

"I fuck you, Jove!" he shouted, and shrieked in delight. He felt an erection and cursed the human engineers who had not designed the suit to provide him a release for it. He hunched, trying to rub it against something. No good. The suit fit too well. Humans had hands, so they could masturbate. Their one evolutionary advantage. He wanted a female to assault, but there wasn't one for millions of kilometers.

He thought of a shark he and the rest of his pod had killed. The dolphins had violated it repeatedly, contemptuously, then sent its body spinning into the depths, cursing it as it sank. The thought gave him a warm glow. And that sailor, who had fallen off his fishing boat near Malta! Humans were poorly built, and Weissmuller still fondly remembered the way the man's ribs had cracked like brittle coral against his snout. Had there been witnesses, of course, the dolphins would have ignored him, or even saved his life by pushing him to shore, the sort of grandstand

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behavior that so impressed humans. But it had been night and the man alone in the sea. How he had struggled! One of Weissmuller's brothers still bore scars from the man's scaling knife, making him a target for mockery.

Weissmuller's lust was now an agony. Could he ever violate Jupiter the same way? Could even the humans, through one of their massive, incomprehensible devices? Damn them for this insulating suit!

He distracted himself by thinking of international securities markets. The flows appeared as clearly in his mind as the currents in the Cyclades, which he had maneuvered since youth. What a roiled and complex sea the humans had invented! Capital flowed from Japan the way fresh water pours from an iceberg. The money fluid washed back and forth, rising here because of the hectic warmth of success, roiled and turbulent there because of an opposing flow. His investments, concealed under a variety of front organizations like clever hermit crabs, were doing well. It was another sea where Weissmuller could swim. No other dolphin could. But then, no other dolphin was God's Remora. He could eat the morsels from Her jaws.

Ahead, finally, was Jupiter Forward. Exuberantly, Weissmuller did a poly-octave Tarzan yell which stretched up into the ultrasonic. He arched gracefully around the space station—and whipped his tail to brake. The vast bulk of Clarence, the cyborg whale, floated beyond it, a tiny human figure just above the whale's head. Ilya Stasov. Weissmuller fought down the urge to turn and flee. He was bone-tired, and the radiation alarms were becoming actively painful. Besides, what could Stasov do to him? After all, he was the Messiah.

"Ah, Weissmuller," Stasov said. "Thanks for coming back. Find anything interesting?" Aided by computer voice synthesis, he could speak almost as well as a dolphin. Weissmuller found his speech slightly menacing, as if the dolphin words concealed orca teeth.

"None of your business," he said sullenly. "Bugger off."

"I'm afraid it is my business." The tone was mild. "You must talk to Clarence."

Weissmuller approached the whale. Microwave echo-location was useless at this range, since the click and its return overlapped, but the clever humans had installed a processor which gave the dolphin a calculated synthetic echo. The human-modified sperm whale was now huge, much larger than even blue whales had ever been. Weissmuller had never heard a blue whale. They had vanished long before he was born.

"Don't threaten me! You can't. Article 15 of the Treaty of Santa Barbara. I'll tell the Delphine Delegation and they'll replace you. See if they won't."

"Don't be an idiot, Weissmuller. They won't replace me."

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Weissmuller twitched irritably, setting off random bursts of fire from his rockets. He knew they would never replace Stasov, no matter what the human did. Stasov had continued to live when he should have been dead, because his tasks were unfinished. The thought of what completion would mean frightened the dolphin. "I won't do what you say, I don't care what—"

"You must talk to Clarence now, Weissmuller. He's in terror. He doesn't know where he is. He needs your help."

"Fuck you!" Weissmuller shrieked, and buffeted Stasov with his powerful tail. The man sailed off helplessly, tumbling until he managed to regain control with his own clumsy maneuver rockets.

"You float like a jellyfish," Weissmuller called. "A sea urchin!"

When Weissmuller had been young, he'd heard a story about ghost voices, about long-dead whales whose last calls had echoed around the seas for decades, refracting through thermoclines, sucked into the depths by cold subsurface cataracts, resonating through abyssal trenches, to finally rise up and moan their long-sunken words to the hearing of a terrified dolphin. When Stasov finally spoke, he spoke with the voice of a ghost.

"When I first did this, I had no idea of what I had done. Now I understand. It is . . . necessary. Forgive me."

"Forgive you? Feed me, and I'll forgive you. Ha ha." While orcas and humans laughed, dolphins expressed their pleasure more in the way an elderly pervert snorts at short-skirted schoolgirls.

Suddenly, Weissmuller heard the wide sounds of the sea—the clicks, groans, wails, chitters, and thumps of the aquatic obbligato. Ranging far away were the overlapping calls of a gam of humpback whales and the sharp slap as one of them breached and fell back in the water. Nearer were the loud thumps of a school of the tiny fish humans called sea drums. He was afraid. This sea was far away. The dolphin pinged out a tentative echo-location signal.

The echo returned. Bottom was a mile down, past an ill-defined thermocline. There was a set of three submerged volcanic peaks, one with a coral atoll around it, some twenty kilometers away. Nearer was a seamount that made it to the surface, creating a tiny island. Weissmuller knew the place, though he had never been there. The dolphin language had a word for every place in the sea, a word that is a schematic of the echo that the place returned, a sort of physical pun. An intelligent dolphin could carry a map of all the world's seas in his head like an epic poem.

Weissmuller was near the Maldives, in the Indian Ocean. He could hear the shapes of the distant whales as well as those of the fish that swirled around him. He pinged out a stream of signals. They returned,

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bearing their load of information, the details of the terrain, the sizes of the schools of fish.

With that, the pain began. His mind knew that what he heard was not real, but the part of his brain that processed the information was beyond conscious control. He felt a growing panic.

He heard the terrified call of a sperm whale. It was alone and had lost track of its gam in a storm. Weissmuller ignored it. The fears of the huge foolish whales were none of his concern. It called for help. He yelled at it to shut up so that he could hear that marvelous, all-encompassing sea.

Suddenly, the bottom moved. The dolphin felt a primal terror. The sea and its creatures moved eternally, but the land always remained steady. When the bottom of the sea became unstable, everything ended.

He was no longer in the Maldives. He swam the Aegean, and could sense the landmarks of the Sea of Crete as they had been four thousand years before. This was where it had started and where it had ended. The water roared and the bottom shook, marking the destruction of the only universe intelligent dolphins had ever known. Panic pierced through him. The bottom of the sea rippled like the body of a skate, and his mind dissolved in agony.

As the sea bottom rippled it lost its contours, becoming as smooth as the back of a whale. And indeed that was what it was. The floor of the sea had become a whale which thrust powerfully beneath him. Her spout could blow him to the stars.

"Ah, my remora," a giant voice spoke, using the dolphin language but not sounding like a dolphin or an orca. "The parasite on God. I should rub you off on the barnacled hull of a human ship and leave you to sink to the bottom of the sea."

"No!" Weissmuller screamed. "You can't! I am your Echo. I know it all. All! I have done my duty. I know how humans work. I know their money, their markets. I can defeat them. I can achieve our destiny. You know me!"

God's back rose up towards him and the edges of the sea closed in. The surface of the water above him became solid. Weissmuller heard his own echoes returning faster and faster, with improbable clarity. And he would be unable to breathe! He was trapped. He was going to die.

"I know you," God's voice said. "You are a coward and a fool."

"No! Forgive me! Forgive—"

The walls closed in around him, and then vanished, leaving the vasts of space. Weissmuller keened desperately and flailed around in terror. "Stasov!" he shrieked. "Where are you? Let me die!"

"You know me," Stasov said quietly.

"I know you! You changed the world so we would speak. You tore the voice from our throats! Your teeth gave us birth. Oh, it hurts. Life hurts!"

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"It always hurts. You are the Echo of God. The thinking races of the sea have raised you up here so that you may pull them after you. You will hurt most of all. Or so you will believe." Stasov paused. "I'll never forgive you for having forced me to do this. Instead of completion I end with the knowledge that pain is never finished."

"A human problem, not mine," Weissmuller said. "I will talk to the whale." Then, plaintively: "I'm sorry I went to Io. I feel sick. Ilya?"

Stasov silently activated the whale's voice. Clarence promptly sounded an elaborate and specific call.

Weissmuller shook, panicked. "It's a death call, Stasov. A death call!"

"What else do you expect?" Stasov said coldly. "Do you think that you're the only one who wants to die? I've heard that call before."

Stasov had once watched a gam of seven fin whales get chased for three days across the South Atlantic by two cooperating pods of orcas. It was a vicious, hard pursuit. Finally the fins, tired and spent, sent a call to the orcas, who stopped pursuing immediately and waited. The fins gathered close together and talked to each other while the orcas swept around them. Finally, one fin whale emerged from the gam and swam out to the orcas. The whales had decided among themselves which was going to be eaten. The orcas tore that one to pieces and let the others swim away unharmed.

"Clarence wants to negotiate his death with you."

"What do I say to him? I don't know what to say!"

"Tell him he has to live. To live and suffer. Just like the rest of us."

One of Jupiter Forward's spinning rings was filled with water, providing Weissmuller with a place to live. He could swim around and around it, leaping into the air at those place that engineers had raised the ceiling, and feel almost at home. No solid place intruded. There was nowhere for a human being to stand, so Erika Morgenstern and Ilya Stasov floated in the water. Morgenstern hated this, as an affront to her dignity, but there was no way to compel the dolphin to visit her office.

"What did he do to you, Ilya?" she whispered. "I haven't seen you look like this since . . . since we met."

"It's what I did to him that matters," he answered, his voice flat.

"But what—"

"I had to do it *again*. What I once did all unknowing, I just did with full understanding of what it meant."

The dolphin appeared around the curve of the ring, skimming the water towards them. He had learned to use the low gravity and the Coriolis force of the spinning ring to extend his leaps. He hit the water with his belly, splashing them, and vanished. A moment later he nuzzled the Director's crotch. She gasped, then, having been briefed by Stasov,

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reacted by driving her heel into the dolphin's sensitive blowhole. Weissmuller surfaced and keened in pain.

"Stop it," Stasov said. "It's what you deserve."

"Screw you, Madame Director," Weissmuller said. In air his breath was foul with old fish. He moved his head towards her and, despite herself, she ran her hands down his smooth sides. He wriggled. "Did you buy Vortek like I told you?"

Her hands stopped. "Yes."

"And?"

"It's up seventeen in the past month, damn you! How did you know? How could a dolphin possibly know anything about the technical knowledge market? And more importantly, why did you tell me?" She pushed him away.

"I wanted you to understand that I'm not just kidding around. I know where the tuna school. Believe it."

"What are you talking about?"

The dolphin was silent for a long moment. "About one kilometer south-southwest of Portland Point, in the sea off the island of Jamaica, is the wreckage of the *Constantino de Braganza,* a Spanish treasure ship out of Cartagena, sunk in 1637 by a Dutch privateer as she tried to flee to the safety of Port Royal. We heard it happen but we didn't know what humans were fighting for. It carried three tons of gold bullion, another ton and a half of specie, and an equal amount of silver, all of which now lies on the bottom, along with the bones of men." He spoke almost tonelessly, as if reciting a long-ago lesson. "Given the rights of the Delphine Delegation in such matters, I think it might be possible for us to assist you directly, Madame Director Morgenstern. If you agree to assist us. We know where the ships lie. We remember."

"You mean the goddam Treaty of Santa Barbara gives the dolphins—"

"Full salvage rights," Weissmuller interrupted gleefully. "Anything that went down more than fifty years ago. Article 77, and sections 1 and 2 of Article 78. You thought your technology gave you the advantage. Ha. You forgot about our memory. It's long. Longer than you ever dreamed. Humans think they're so smart. Big joke."

She turned to Stasov. "You must have known. How did you allow them to swindle us like this?"

He stared back at her and did not reply.

"All that money," she murmured. "All that money . . . "

"We want to make a deal," Weissmuller prompted.

"What are you offering me?" she asked.

Weissmuller twitched and wailed suddenly, as if he were a mystic in a trance. "Full control of the next project! Not subject to restrictions, regulations, and the need to resolve conflicts between various entities.

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I'm the first dolphin in space. I won't be the last. Not by a long shot. We want to escape, and we need the hands of humans to do it. Humans must carry us to the stars. I hate it! Our destiny, in the hands of *humans*. All I can do is pay you. There's a Venetian galley off the coast of Dalmatia, full of gold. It sank in 1204. I hope you rot in hell." He twisted and disappeared into the water.

"*They* aren't the ones who want it, Ilya," she whispered. "I don't know why, but *you* want them to go to the stars. That's why you helped them with the Treaty of Santa Barbara."

"That's true," he answered simply.

"I've known it since I visited you in Leningrad and saw that folder, as I suppose you meant me to. It was just part of your expiation." She swallowed. "Just as I was another. You tried to show me, but I never listened. I had no idea how little I meant to you."

"Erika, I had no choice. I had to make up for the evil I had done. I've explained it to you before."

"Is your guilt the most important thing in the universe? Is everything you've done since I found you at Camp Homma justified by it?"

They drifted apart in the water as if physically pushed by her intensity.

"I needed to reach an ending," Stasov said. "I needed to find completion."

She stared at him, suddenly frightened. "And have you?"

He shook his head slowly. "Nothing is ever complete. But I reached my ending before I left Homma. I realized that when I tortured Weissmuller, with the full knowledge of what I was doing. I'd always had that knowledge. I'd always known. I ripped their minds apart so that we could conquer some rocks in the North Pacific. I tormented them to satisfy my curiosity."

"No," she breathed. "No. You never knew."

"Perhaps I didn't know they could speak. But I always knew they could suffer. And as long as I live, they *will* suffer."

"They'll suffer even if you don't live."

He looked at her for a long moment. "True. But that will be none of my concern."

Stasov floated in space, the great form of the whale in front of him.

"Ilya," Weissmuller said, his voice large and hollow. "I have done all that I had to. We can float now, humans, dolphins, and orcas, on a great sea of cash. With that money we can swim to the stars. It's hateful! I feel more disgusted that I ever thought I'd be."

"Yes," Stasov said. "The Time of the Breath is upon us." Jupiter loomed above him, through some odd error of perception, like a heavy fruit ready to fall. Clarence drifted quiescent, singing a simple song to himself,

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almost a lullaby. His physical systems had been checked, and Weissmuller had managed to calm him down, finally doing the job that most humans believed he had been brought to do. Stasov alone knew that he had been brought to lead his people forth from the sea.

Looking at the dolphin and his massive companion, Stasov had a sudden image of dolphins, grinning faces at the front of the bodies that were their ships, slipping through the spaces between the stars, gamboling amid the debris of the cometary Oort cloud that surrounded each star, whipping, in tight formation, over the frozen surface of a neutron star, and finally plunging through a planet's warm, blue atmosphere to fall hissing, red-hot, into the alien sea, there to swim and play as they always had. When the time came to move on, they would blast with a roar back into the infinite spaces that had become their second home. Humans, more sedate and deliberate, would follow after in their own ships, dolphins leaping in their bow waves and guiding them to a safe port.

Morgenstern would, he knew, continue the task that had driven her since youth, even though she had discovered that her passion had been used by another for his own purposes. Neither she nor the dolphins had seen any reason to pull cetaceans into space, but Stasov had decided.

"What happens to the Remora once his God breathes?" Weissmuller said. "What happens to the Echo once God has located what She is after? What am I now?"

"Nothing," Stasov said. "And less than nothing."

The countdown was reaching its conclusion and Clarence's rockets prepared themselves to blast.

"Then let me die! I can go with Clarence and sink into the endless seas of Jupiter. I've done what I had to."

"No," Stasov said. "You're still necessary to others. It's my turn to die."

"You selfish shark spawn!" Weissmuller shrieked. "You've played with us, ripped us apart, driven us to our destiny, and called up *our* God to help you create the echo that *you* want to hear. You always get your way! I say I will die and there isn't anything you can do about it!" He thrust his tail and his rockets flared. "I won't stop at Io this time!"

Stasov had expected this, and was already straddling the dolphin, as if riding him through the sea. He manually stopped down the oxygen flow until Weissmuller was suffocating. The rockets died, and the dolphin shuddered beneath him.

"Ilya," Weissmuller said forlornly. "I fear the net. Humans caught us when we followed the tuna, suffocated and killed us, thoughtlessly. They didn't realize that when we listen we do not think, and are thus easily captured. You tortured us with false echoes and woke us up. Are you going to haul us to the stars in your nets? Won't you ever leave us alone? Won't you ever stop tormenting us?"

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"There's only one way to stop. I see that. You don't have to tell me."

"Do you think death will stop you? The pain is always there. Damn you!"

Stasov drifted near Clarence, until the surface of the whale suddenly changed from something next to him to something beneath him. He found the point of attachment and tied himself to it.

With smooth thrust, fusion flames blossomed around Clarence's midsection. Clarence sang a journey song, one full of landmarks in a sea that he would never hear again. Could he invent new ones for the deeper sea of Jupiter?

Stasov rested against the gravity created by Clarence's acceleration.

He would never hear Clarence's new songs.

Soon he would sink into the deepest sea of all. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Exciting new writer **Megan Lindholm,** author of the well-received novel *The Wizard of the Pigeons,* returns to these pages next month with our November cover story, "A Touch of Lavender," the bittersweet story of an embattled young boy's complex and subtle relationship with a strange alien being, one of the most poignant and moving stories we've ever published. **Walter Jon Williams,** whose "Surfacing" was a finalist for both the Hugo and Nebula Awards this year, is also on hand for November, returning with another big novella, this one a taut and engrossing Alternate Worlds story that takes us to the bitter last days of the Civil War, and shows us how one of the Great Men of the nineteenth century, one not usually thought of as a soldier, might have dealt with the old hard questions of military command, in the thought-provoking "No Spot Of Ground."

ALSO IN NOVEMBER: Multiple Hugo-and Nebula-winner **Robert Silverberg** takes us on an unusual and suspenseful journey into the realms of the ultrasmall, in "Chip Runner"; then **Allen M. Steele**—one of the most exciting new writers of hard science fiction to come along in quite a while—takes us from the sub-atomic world to the High Frontier, for a look at a deadly emergency at an orbital construction site, and the fallible human beings who must deal with it, in "Ride to Live, Live to Ride." Multiple Hugo-and Nebula-winner **Orson Scott Card** returns with a touching and tragic examination of outcasts struggling for existence on the fringes of a high-tech future society, in "Dogwalker"; and **Ronald Anthony Cross** treats us to a wild and gonzo look at what reporters for supermarket tabloids *really* have to go through to come up with those bizarre headlines you goggle at while waiting in the checkout line, in "The Front Page." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our November issue on sale on your newsstands on September 19, 1989.

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Obscure Lightness

Light Raid

By Connie Willis & Cynthia Felice
Ace, $17.95

Light Raid by Connie Willis and Cynthia Felice starts off like *Nancy Drew Escapes the Blitz,* as we meet teenaged Hellene Ariadne, who has been evacuated to neutral British Columbia to escape the deadly satellite laser attacks on her home city of Denver. Ariadne concludes that something's wrong back home (in addition to the laser attacks) where her mother and father are heads of Research and Security respectively in the giant Hydra Corporation, and so she escapes what is in effect evacuee detention and makes her way back to Denver. Here she finds herself in a mess of intrigue involving her mother, who has been arrested as a Quebecan spy, the Prince of Saskatchewan, and his handsome equerry, who is really a representative of Scotland Yard.

How did Scotland Yard get involved in all this? Why are all the employees of the Hydra Corp. called Hellene? What *are* hydras? Who knows? The authors are singularly parsimonious on details of this future, and while what's up front is often intriguing, so little of the background is filled in that the reader is left groping in the dark. Another example—if the Western States are now a separate entity, what about the Eastern States? Not a word. There's absolutely no sense of the rest of the world at all.

The two authors are also of the school that sprinkles its narratives with the jargon of the particular future without bothering to explain it, which implies a certain optimism (perhaps tinged with arrogance) that the reader will be swept along by the story and put up with all these unknowns until they are made clear, *if* they are made clear. This attitude also overlaps the scientific aspects of the story. A lot of the intrigue centers around biots, which seem to be mutated hydras capable of protecting computers from lasers. (This is only a guess, mind you, based on the little information given.) Much of the hanky panky has to do with computers and unless you're more than just a little computer literate, a lot of it will be obscure.

Light Raid, page by page, is amusing, its heroine is engaging, and what we learn of the background world is intriguing. It's too bad it's undermined by the authors' reluctance to fill in details. A major

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character in the novel is a computer with enormous intuitive abilities. Perhaps the authors were expecting the same of their public.

Go For Baroque?

Sugar Rain
By Paul Park
Morrow, $17.95

Sugar Rain is the second of Paul Park's "Starbridge Chronicles," but they are not so interdependent that they can't be read separately. The link is the Starbridge world, which may be Earth of the far future (there *are* a few details lacking which may have been given in the first book: if so, they should have been reprised in the second).

In any case, it's quite a world, decadent and riddled with drugs and religion. It's a world of calculators, horned horses, high-rise buildings, hashish, pickup trucks, and edible plastics, with all the technology in the last stages of decay. It's a world of "sugar rain," precipitation that sticks like treacle and smells of sugar and gasoline.

It's the Earth as a third-world country—a third-world world, as it were. The best description is that it is a sort of nightmarish version of India, ruled by religion. (The Indian connection is emphasized by Park's nomenclature—"Durbar Square," "Raksha Starbridge," "Spider Ghat"—and the prevailing caste system.) The all-important religion is supposedly that of a human savior, but there are enough other figures in his legend to compare with the Hindu pantheon; many of the powerful priesthood are eunuchs and/or blind. The secular aristocrats are all of the Starbridge family—there seem to be thousands of them.

And, most importantly, this is a world where a year lasts a couple of centuries in "our" days, and the seasons are generations in length. Civilizations rise and fall in a year, often due to the vicissitudes brought on by a hard winter thousands of days long.

It is early spring in *Sugar Rain* and the city of Charn is in chaos. We follow two Starbridge cousins, Charity and Thanakar, adulterous lovers, as they are separated by the revolution—a revolution of the underclass that, in its politics and personalities, bears more than a passing resemblance to the one whose second centenary we celebrated back in July.

No brief review could do justice to the richness and strangeness of this world; there's a hint of Mervyn Peake and more than a touch of Gene Wolfe's Urth. Park sets a chaotic plot in an equally chaotic setting, and it requires a little patience to sort out, but if you're a devotee of baroque SF, it's worth it.

Venice Preserved

The Invisible Company
By Scott Russell Sanders
Tor, $3.95 (paper)

Back in the first part of the century, there was a vogue for all-powerful villains who ran shadowy organizations that could get in

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anywhere and do in anybody (Fu Manchu, et al.). These days the organization has replaced the individual (one could say in real life as well as literature, but let's not get into *that*) and the all-powerful corporation is designed to cater to our paranoia. Take for example Scott Russell Sanders' *The Invisible Company*.

The time is just around the bend of the next century, a future of mean-streeted cities and ubiquitous robots. Leon Ash is a middle-aged theoretical physicist who years before had been involved in a near-fatal accident (in which his wife was killed). His life was saved by emissaries of a mysterious organization called the Invisible Company, who asked only that at some unspecified time in the future he would make a journey at its behest.

Kate is a failed actress who is in the hire of the Invisible Company, which has simply paid her well at various times to travel to varied destinations and masquerade as various characters in mysterious little real-life scenarios.

The city of Venice has been swallowed by the Mediterranean, but has been rebuilt entirely on Paradise Island—a luxury resort off the Maine coast. Kate and Leon find themselves there. Leon has been virtually kidnapped but has realized that this is the pay-off journey for the IC. Kate is there on assignment, but for the first time in her own persona, which she finds strange.

Why are they there? When they meet and begin an affair, are they being manipulated? Who are the two sexy adolescents (male and female) that seem so desperate to seduce Leon? Who, for that matter, is the talkative nonagenarian woman who seems to know everything that Kate and Leon do?

The answers, of course, are the point, beans not to be spilled. But the novel is a neat little combination of SF, intrigue thriller, and mystery, and the resolution of the enigmas is surprising and ingenious, albeit highly unlikely. There are some clues for the literately knowledgeable early on: I cussed myself out for not getting them.

Like Cats and Dogs

Urn Burial
By Robert Westall
Greenwillow, $11.95

A few years ago, Robert Westall gave us a fine time fantasy, *The Devil On the Road*; it was a YA (young adult) but like so many others in that underestimated category it transcended such easy pigeonholing. Now we have an exercise in SF from the same author.

Again the hero is a British working-class youth, this one a farm laborer in the Pennines. The sensitive type, Ralph frequents a high and desolate tract called Fiend's Fell, mostly inhabited by sheep. On the fell are ancient cairns, man-high heaps of stones used by the sheep farmers as location marks in snow. Ralph notices that one of them is falling apart, and when trying to repair it, he discovers the body of

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a felinoid alien, neatly buried with several artifacts.

Being a sensible modern adolescent, Ralph knows what he has found, but decides to leave the body in peace. But disturbance of the artifacts precipitates all sorts of events which can only be ascribed to alien visitors, and Ralph finds himself the focal point of interest by what seem to be two warring species. One is that of the buried alien, feline and evidently benign, if rather superior in manner. The other is more canine, and provides some hair-raising moments as representatives lurk about Ralph's village, since they bear more than a passing resemblance to the popular image of the werewolf. They are also distinctly malevolent.

Ralph is witness to a rousing dog (and cat) fight between opposing ships over the fells (which play hob with Britain's radar system), and is eventually captured by the nasties and rescued by the friendlies, who have a certain contempt for ape-derived species. Luckily, Ralph has always had an empathy for other animals and there's a mission on Earth that can only be accomplished by an "ape."

This book doesn't quite transcend the YA classification—the aliens are a little too much like anthropomorphic animals, and Westall's multi-species universe is a bit simplistic (albeit with some poetic, C. S. Lewis implications). But he's a splendid writer, and the details of life in an English farming community (especially when confronted by inexplicable aliens) are wonderfully realized. And his own empathy with animals shines through in his portraits of the farm beasts and particularly in the book's bitter dedication—"For all the higher mammals that trusted man—And got betrayed."

Unbalanced Odyssey

Dreams of Stone
By Jonathan Wylie
Bantam, $3.95 (paper)

There's something off center about Jonathan Wylie's *Dreams of Stone*, something a little odd and asymmetrical. This could be because it's a fantasy with a slightly different flavor or because it's Volume 1 of "The Unbalanced Earth Trilogy" (which, FYI, follows the "Servants of the Ark" trilogy); in any case, it's not necessarily a bad thing.

In the middle of a desert, by a great standing stone, a young wanderer named Arden comes upon Gemma, a beautiful young woman dying of thirst. She is from the Northern Islands and has come to the southern continent on which they are (and of which Arden is a native) following a strange compelling "call." Fourteen years before, their world had suffered a series of major natural catastrophes called "the Leveling." Gemma implies that she had something to do with creating this catastrophe, and furthermore, that the southern continent had not even existed before that. Arden is having none of it; he's lived there all his life and,

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besides, doesn't believe in magic. Gemma does, but says that its rules have changed since the Leveling.

This curious and disputatious duo embarks on what is less a quest than a mission. Arden has discovered an idyllic valley in the mountains containing a community of long-lived, always-healthy and slightly telepathic people; its water supply (a river) has failed, and since the valley folk can't live outside, Arden has volunteered to seek help from the government in Great Newport, which more or less rules the continent.

After various adventures in that decadent and tyrannical city, which turns down Arden's plea for help, they go back to the Valley and head south to find the source of, and perhaps the solution to, the dried up river. Gemma has now learned that she has certain wild talents, and her siren song is still calling from the south. On the way, they are suddenly transported to a large city which has such things as telephones and wake-up calls (which we recognize, but they don't), but almost no inhabitants.

In a library there, Gemma finds evidence that there are all sorts of alternate realities; also, one of the stranger inhabitants (he talks in anagrams) provides a clue that the standing stone has something to do with the river's flow . . .

See what I mean? Centered is not exactly what I would call this novel. (And I didn't even mention the telepathic meyrkats who end each of their mind talk speeches with their own name for ID purposes, but at least don't add "over.") And stand warned that at the end of this volume Arden has disappeared down an underground river, and that there are more unanswered questions than on a month of *Jeopardy*. Nonetheless, it has a curiously engaging quality, Gemma and Arden argue and fall in love most satisfyingly, and the modern city episode is off the wall enough to rival anything in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

8 Is Enough

The Eight

By Katherine Neville
Ballantine, $18.95

A generation ago, fantasy was regarded by the general public as something consigned to Disney films and children's books, and except for a bit of whimsy here and there, certainly never appeared as "adult literature." Now fantasy has crept into the mainstream and onto the best seller lists, and it's always interesting to take a look at fantasies that are marketed as mainstream and not genre.

Interesting, but not necessarily edifying, as proved by Katherine Neville's *The Eight*. This lengthy farrago is something about a jeweled chess set coded with the secret of the ages, an abbess in the French Revolution who is pledged to scatter the components of the set across Europe, and a group of moderns trying to put the pieces back together again. Involved in all this are Catherine the Great, Riche-

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lieu's coded diaries, Voltaire, the KGB, Charlemagne, Freemasonry, the Basques, Napoleon's Egyptian expedition, the Casbah, and the aforementioned secret of the ages, which seems to be that elixir of life that everybody in those 1930s movies was looking for.

Neville more or less has her history straight (Catherine the Great did indeed acquire Voltaire's library), but what she fills in between the lines is pretty silly. She's also a "had I but known" writer, a style I thought went out with the nineteenth century. And they say *genre* authors can't write.

Cosmic Candide

The Third Eagle
By R. A. McAvoy
Doubleday, $18.95

The first science fiction novel by that antic writer of fantasy, R. A. McAvoy, is just as unusual as you might expect it to be. To begin with, *The Third Eagle* is about as close to Voltaire's *Candide* as SF has come. If any comparison to a classic sends you off in another direction, relax. The theme of the ignorant innocent adrift in a cold cruel world (here *several* cold cruel worlds) need not be a treatise in philosophy, but just a light-hearted exercise in story-telling that happens to lightly reiterate Voltaire's message (which is that, when all is said and done, it is a cold, cruel world—nothing intimidating in *that*—at least for those who have already learned it).

The Candide in this case is one Wambli of the Painted Wacaan, a proud but downtrodden people (human) of the backwater planet Neunacht. Their major occupation is that of hired bodyguard to the wealthier inhabitants of the planet. They have a certain amount of ritual; they are excellent warriors, with weapons or hand-to-hand combat; they are clan-ruled. The resemblance to the Amerindians of Earth is hardly coincidental; it turns out that their sacred language is that of the ancient Lakota Sioux.

After an early morning dustup with some would-be assassins of his employer, Wambli (who has never been the ideal Wacaan warrior psychologically, try though he might) walks off the job and into the spaceport. There he catches the first ship out into the inhabited universe of the seven sentient races (of which humanity is the most expansionist, but hardly the wackiest).

He has a vague idea of getting to New Benares where are made the shimmers (3-D entertainments) that have formed his view of the universe, but it turns out that he's going in the totally opposite direction, due to his inexperience in such matters as buying tickets and cosmography in general.

He winds up on the frontier planet of Icor, where he falls in with a dayflower (an elephantine but short-lived race), takes part in a satisfyingly shimmer-like barroom brawl, and nearly freezes his

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butt off before he figures out how to buy a coat. His adventures take him eventually to New Benares, where he becomes a stuntman in the shimmers; to Poos, where he becomes a prostitute in a multi-racial establishment where no one comes for any act as ordinary as copulation; and eventually to the good ship *Condor*. The *Condor* is inhabited by the nomadic Revivalists, an unpopular sect who make a living tracking down ships sent out centuries before FTL travel. The passengers, crew, and cargo of these ships are treated as salvage—a viewpoint which occasions a moral crisis for Wambli.

There's no room here to go into detail of the (sometimes black) humor of Wambli's universe, or the charm of this innocent powerhouse bouncing off the obstacles the universe lays in his path. The results are a funny and inventive novel, and need it be said that Wambli does return to Neunacht to plant his garden in an unexpected way?

Texas Nexus

The Nexus
By Mike McQuay
Bantam, $4.50 (paper)

In *The Nexus*, Mike McQuay has taken the theme of H. G. Wells's *The Man Who Could Work Miracles* and given it the modern treatment, with lots of wordage, sex (most of it modishly unpleasant), and violence. Dennis Stiller, a cynical TV reporter demoted to doing local features for the network because he had given the President a hard time in an interview, goes for a story on a faith healer who "performs" in a bar in Dallas, Texas. The drunken, slatternly woman does indeed do amazing things, including fixing the crippled leg of his cameraman. As it turns out, it is Amy, the woman's autistic daughter, who is responsible for the events; they are performed by some sort of mental power, and there seems no limit to what Amy can do when "connected" to someone who wishes for something.

Stiller assumes control of the child, and predictable disaster results. Seen on network TV, Amy's powers are soon known worldwide, and Stiller is forced by circumstance to larger and larger "miracles" until the entire world is in chaos. The usual villains are set against him—the government, a venal television evangelist, and the totally unscrupulous corporate head of the network.

McQuay falls into a trap that is almost inevitable when handling stories of wishes, unlimited power, etc. Why don't the principals use their incredible abilities to correct the mess they're causing? Why doesn't Stiller straighten out Amy's problem mother? Why doesn't he somehow negate the publicity which is bringing tens of thousands of people to Dallas, causing total chaos? (He is worried initially about those who *won't* believe; the savvy reader is way ahead of him, worrying about those who *will*.) In short, the hero (and friends) come across as fairly dimwitted.

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There are other problems, but the big one is the philosophical question raised by the theme, that of the use of ultimate power. There's also the matter of religion, since most people view Amy's powers as miraculous (hardly anyone appears to want to find a scientific rationale, but that may be all too likely in this new Age of Unreason). I just wasn't convinced by McQuay's handling of these factors.

And, finally, Amy's powers are never really explained. Is this a fantasy? Is it SF? That wouldn't matter if it all came off, but you're left wanting *some* sort of basic rationale, if only one of fantasy. Maybe this is one of those ideas that can only be handled as Wells did it, as a fable with a light touch.

Talents

A Talent For War

By Jack McDevitt

Ace, $3.95 (paper)

Despite the martial title and the bellicose cover, Jack McDevitt's second novel, *A Talent For War,* is not military SF. I may not be doing the author any favor by saying this; SF militarism is IN this year, but I am still optimist enough to believe that readers want a *good* novel first and a particular subcategory second, contrary to popular publishing wisdom. So for what it's worth, *A Talent For War* is a very good novel indeed.

What is it if it's not militaristic? It's an academic mystery story, a quest for information on a great historical event that happened in the past of the future in which the novel is set (there *must* be a better way of phrasing that!). Such speculations *re* real history are limited, as it were, by real history, but it's a crackerjack idea for the future.

The great historical event was, as it happens, a war—mankind's greatest, against humanoid telepathic aliens, the Ashiyyur. McDevitt has taken as a model the classic situation of the Greeks and Persians—the scattered various human colonies more occupied with squabbling amongst themselves than in uniting against the monolithic enemy. (This is not just guesswork—there are more than a few references to the Persian-Greek conflicts in the novel.)

The human-Ashiyyur war is a maze of battles and intrigue—human-human as well as human-alien—and it spawns even more epic legends and personalities than most wars. Two hundred years later, Alex Benedict, a young dealer in antiquities, is led to suspect that the accepted histories of the most prominent of the human heroes and his comrades and final engagements are not true. And that Alex's archaeologist uncle, now missing in an interstellar liner accident, was on the track of something big in an uncharted region of space.

I can't say much about the quest, both because it is all centered on the unknown facts and artifacts for which Alex is searching all over the known galaxy, and because it's

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very complicated—the reader really has to pay attention. Don't get the idea that it's a novel solely devoted to interstellar research (of which there *is* plenty, intriguingly presented in a context of many inhabited worlds and instant access to almost all knowledge and history). There's a goodly amount of action, too: somebody's after the same whatevers that Alex is, and plays rough about it; there are detailed sensory reconstructions of a couple of major battles; and the final revelation brings forth a confrontation with its share of shots fired.

A word should be said about McDevitt's future universe. Without being gimmicky or incomprehensible, it's one of the most complete and believable I've run into, and a thesis could be written on why he makes it work. Lacking room for such a thesis, I can say that nothing is forced or exaggerated; it's a very *human* future.

A Talent For War may not be the most accurate phrase for the novel; a talent for writing is quite the right phrase for the author.

Flower Power

The City, Not Long After

By Pat Murphy

Doubleday, $17.95

The theme of the innocent, fey individualists pitting themselves against a conformist society is not exactly new—it brings back memories of the mid-century mainstream, of Capote's *The Grass Harp* and Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*. And while there haven't been that many examples of it in science fiction (fey individualism not being a strong trait of most SF characters), it still has a slightly nostalgic quality when it does appear, as in Pat Murphy's *The City, Not Long After* (which for this and other reasons might well have been buried in a time capsule for a couple of decades).

"The City" is San Francisco, and "Not Long After" is sixteen years—sixteen years, that is, since the plague struck the population of the world, leaving only a handful of (unexplained) survivors. There are about four hundred in San Francisco, and the thrust of the novel is how these few hold off an invasion by a tinpot militaristic general from California's Central Valley who wants to re-establish America.

This they do in all sorts of whimsical ways because they are all characterized as being artists of one sort or another; one is a whiz at tattoos, another arranges human skulls in a department store window, a third strings wires from the top of City Hall to make a giant aeolian harp. The putative protagonist, Danny-Boy, arranges three hundred pairs of women's shoes on a staircase, and yearns to paint the Golden Gate Bridge blue (and succeeds in doing so with the help of a migrating horde of butterflies). Ms. Murphy's interpretation of what makes an artist seems to match the currently fashionable one of anyone who can put one brick on top of another and convince a gallery

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owner that it's art—the "It's art if I say it is" theory. Valid enough given the circumstances of the story, I guess; there aren't that many people left to argue the point.

This is only one of the more unrealistic aspects of a generally unrealistic story. The "artists" have at the invading army with various measures calculated not to get anybody killed (a herd of stampeding bison from the park, a whiff of LSD, and the city itself takes a hand by conjuring up visions and ghosts), but things are eventually settled in what is meant to be a morally ironic climax when Danny-Boy takes a shotgun to the general.

I used the term science fiction above; this is, on second thought, not quite right. Essentially, Murphy has created an SF milieu, the post-apocalypse city, and set against it a fantasy (perhaps it's not stretching things too far to call it a fable) redolent of the 1960s, with non-violent, dope-smoking flower children as heroes. There's even a rain of golden blossoms when Danny-Boy and the nameless young woman who has come to warn the city make love.

In the brief biographical sketch at the end of the book, Ms. Murphy says that her favorite color is ultraviolet. It figures.

Dicey

Gamearth
By Kevin J. Anderson
Signet, $3.95 (paper)

The invention in most gaming-type novels is generally on a par with most game scenarios— derivative and/or comic bookish, which is why not too many of them get written about in this space. Kevin J. Anderson has made an attempt at something different in his *Gamearth*, with mixed results.

Four friends have been at their role-playing, created world game for years (generations in the time of Gamearth, the created world), playing once a week. One wants to quit, but abiding by a roll of the dice, continues. But he's determined to destroy the "world" and sets out, by the rules, to create circumstances that will do so. One of the other players, feeling the reality of Gamearth, is determined he will not succeed.

Most of the action takes place in Gamearth, which is not the most original of worlds. There are trolls, cyclops, sorcerers, panther people that are sort of feline centaurs, and, of course, four magic artifacts (for earth, air, fire, and water) which are in the shape of many-sided dice (what else?).

The protagonists are a pair of cousins (one brainy, one brawny) and a half-breed sorcerer. Their stronghold is captured by trolls, and they go off on a quest to rescue the daughter of yet another sorcerer, the one who has the water die; she has been captured by a dragon.

The game is interactive, of course, and the players inevitably become involved—two of them are stuck in a particular locale in which tech-

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nology replaces magic (and whose major scientists are Frankenstein and Verne), and we get glimpses of the game being played, but there's just not enough correlation between the "play" and the events in (on?) Gamearth. What could have been an interesting interweaving of two realities just doesn't mesh. What's worse, the novel ends with the stronghold and the sorcerer's daughter restored, and we're more or less right back where we started; the major menace to Gamearth is still lurking in the East somewhere. (The watery sorcerer *has* split the continent with a giant river.) I'm afraid that in whatever sequel Gamearth meets its doom (or doesn't), it will do it without me.

Shoptalk

Due to a certain long-windedness on my part over the past few months, the Shoptalk sections have been fairly brief—this month I'll try and catch up, and apologies that some of the news herein is not as fresh as it might be.

Anthologies, collections and short forms dept. . . . Two women, anthologies with similar titles to make note of and differentiate. *Women of Darkness* is a collection of horror stories by Lisa Tuttle, Kit Reed, Tanith Lee et al. edited by Kathryn Ptacek (Tor, $17.95). On the other hand, *Women of Vision* is devoted to essays by women writing science fiction, examining themselves as authors, their work, and writing in general. The roster of names includes Ursula K. Le Guin, Anne McCaffrey, Alice Sheldon (James Tiptree, Jr.), and Virginia Kidd, among others, and the collection is edited by Denise Du Pont (St. Martin's, $14.95).

In search of something exotic and maybe a little different from what you've been reading? There's *The Best Japanese Science Fiction Stories*, edited by John L. Apostolou and Martin H. Greenberg (Dembner Books, $16.95) . . . Another "Best of," *The Best of the Nebulas*, ed. by Ben Bova, is not an arbitrary choice. The Nebula awards are voted yearly by the Science Fiction Writers of America. The current membership was asked to vote on the best of *those* between 1965 and 1985; the results are the current collection of twenty-one short works, and essays, mostly by their own authors, on the ten selected novels (Tor, $19.95 hardcover, $14.95 paper).

Readers who like the ever-fascinating subject of alternative histories should check out *Alternatives*, edited by Robert Adams, for a choice of choice choices (Baen, $3.50, paper). And I guess readers who like drinking should check out *Another Round At the Spaceport Bar*, edited by George H. Scithers and Darryl Schweitzer, a followup to their first collection of boozy tales (Avon, $3.50, paper).

And there's a single-author collection that should be noted, *Heat Seeker*, by the talented John Shirley. Shirley has become closely associated with the cyberpunk fad, which already seems to be fading

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(not to mention the unfortunate circumstances of the word being adopted by the media as a term for criminal hackers), but his writing transcends that kind of passing fancy (Scream Press, $25.00).

Art dept. . . . Every once in a while I like to point out a cover that's particularly good, since there are so few that stand out these days. There's a dandy one on Charles de Lint's *The Dungeon (Vol. 2)*—a cloaked figure with embossed draperies, and some really fine tentacles rising behind it, in a color scheme of muted jade and coral. Real spiffy. It's by Robert Gould (Bantam, $3.95, paper).

Reprints, retreads, etc. . . . I've found a reprinted murder mystery that I have to make some noise about, since it's really science fiction in the grand tradition of Doyle and Haggard. It's called *The Dark Place,* it's by Aaron J. Elkins, and it's one of a series devoted to Gideon Oliver, who specializes in bones (scientifically speaking, that is). Since it *is* also a murder mystery, and since the solution is inherent in the science fictional content of the novel, I can't really say much about its plot. But take my word for it; if you're intrigued by scientific detection (the Doyle tradition) and anthropological speculation (the Haggard tradition), you'll love it (Popular Library, $3.95, paper).

A delightful oldie which goes in and out of print is back in the "in" mode. John D. MacDonald's *The Girl, the Gold Watch & Everything* is about a gold watch (curiously enough) that stops time save for its owner. You'll find it in the mystery section (Fawcett Crest, $3.95, paper) . . . Roger Zelazny's *Jack of Shadows,* one of the earliest mixes of magic and science, is again available (Signet, $3.95, paper) . . . Oz fans, who seem to be legion, will greet this reprint with oohs and Oz. A real rarity, it's a book of Oz short stories by L. Frank Baum, *Little Wizard Stories of Oz,* appearing in paperback for the first time. Each story concerns two of the celebrities of Oz ("Tik-Tok and the Nome King," "Ozma and the Little Wizard," "Jack Pumpkinhead and the Sawhorse") and has multiple illustrations by that master of art-nouveau, John R. Neill (Bantam-Skylark, $2.95, paper).

Brave little Arkham House carries on, generally with handsome volumes of offbeat material, specifically with its series of Lovecraft works with texts, edited by S. T. Joshi, which are as close to the originals as is possible. The fourth of these is *The Horror in the Museum and Other Revisions,* consisting of HPL's collaborations with, and revisions for, other authors (Arkham House, $18.95). . . . And one of the late, great Robert Heinlein's earliest novels is again available. *Beyond This Horizon* is fascinating for the seeds of so much that was to come (Signet, $3.50, paper).

If you had trouble finding Pat Murphy's Nebula Award-winning novel, *The Falling Woman,* in its first brief paperback edition, know

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that it is now back in print, with luck to remain so for a while (Tor, $3.95, paper). . . . Always make note of Theodore Sturgeon reprints is a rule of mine, as you may have noticed. For some reason, I have an unreasoning terror that his work will be forgotten (possibly because it is so antithetical to most of what's being published nowadays; only the most adventurous of current publishers would publish Sturgeon if he appeared today as a new writer). Therefore, it is to remark that a collection of his wonderful stories, *The Golden Helix,* is republished. I had a mild fit as to what the same publisher used for a cover on his last reprint, *Venus Plus X;* they've redeemed themselves with this one, which shows Ted as a wizard in classical wizard garb (Carroll & Graf, $3.95).

An oddity from the past that should be noted for its authors is *Black Alice* by Thomas M. Disch and John Sladek. It's not SF; described as a "social-comment thriller," it has been unavailable for some time (Carroll & Graf, $3.50).

Two volumes of David Gerrold's series, "The War Against the Chtorr," appeared about five years ago and then vanished, leaving a lot of people very frustrated indeed. The two were about as close as anyone has ever come to Golden Age Heinlein, but with their own contemporary flavor. The reasons for the truncation of the series can be laid to the sometimes baroque problems of the publishing world, but all's well finally. *A Matter For Men* (#1) and *A Day For Damnation* (#2) have reappeared in longer, unedited versions, and #3, *A Rage For Revenge,* continues the story of an invasion of Earth by aliens of unlikely appearance and devastating and diabolical powers (Bantam, $4.50 each, paper).

Sequels, prequels, series, and such . . . the third of Orson Scott Card's "Tales of Alvin Maker" has appeared, *Prentice Alvin* by title (Tor, $17.95) . . . And from Pamela Sargent, a followup to her heavyweight *Venus of Dreams.* This one is *Venus of Shadows* (Doubleday, $19.95) . . . Another of Terry Pratchett's hilarious "Discworld" novels, succinctly called *Mort* (Signet, $3.50, paper) . . . Mary Gentle has written a sequel to her well-received *Golden Witchbreed.* Its title is *Ancient Light* (NAL, $18.95).

Katherine Kurtz readers should know that she's started a whole new series, "The Heirs of Saint Camber," with *The Harrowing of Gwynedd* (Del Rey, $17.95) . . . Jerry Pournelle's first solo novel in quite a while is about *the* mercenary, John Christian Falkenberg. Here he's *Prince of Mercenaries* (Baen, $3.95, paper). . . . The variously authored series called "Crisis of Empire," which chronicles different events in an interstellar Empire just after the Emperor is assassinated, has brought forth a second installment. *Cluster Command* is by David Drake, who con-

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ceived of the series, and Bill Dietz (Baen, $3.50, paper) . . . Harry Harrison's classic Galactic Hero, Bill, has his own series now. Purportedly we'll get a new novel every nine months. The first one is *Bill, the Galactic Hero: The Planet of the Robot Slaves* (Avon, $3.95, paper).

And a happy-sorrowful event. The good news is that Fritz Leiber has given us a precious gift —another story, in fact a novel, about Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. The bad news is that this is said to be the "climax" of the series, the last to be written. The first story was published back in 1939, and over the years the F&GM tales managed to both simultaneously satirize the genre of heroic fantasy (even before there was enough of it to call it a genre), and to expand its boundaries. The new one is *The Knight and Knave of Swords* (Morrow, $17.95).

From the small presses (bless 'em) . . . The Null-A Worlds of A. E. van Vogt by H. L. Drake is devoted to excerpts from interviews with van Vogt conducted by Drake about vV's Null-A novels which back when created a furor in the field ($2.25, Chris Drumm Books [PO Box 445, Polk City, Iowa 50226], paper).

And finally, how can one help but note that Alan Dean Foster's recent novel, *Quozl,* is enhanced by something called "Flip-A-Mation," a device which all readers of Big Little Books will remember fondly?

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Norby Down To Earth* by Janet and Isaac Asimov (Walker, $12.95).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., N.Y., N.Y. 10014.●

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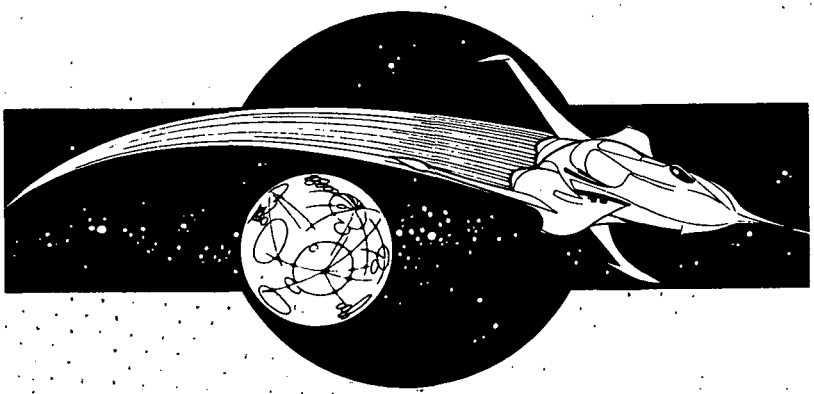

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The WorldCon is upon us, but the smaller cons pick up again at the end of September. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. Early evening's usually a good time to call cons (most are home phones; identify yourself and your reason for calling right off). When writing cons, enclose an SASE (and again, make it plain just what it is you're asking them about). Look for me at cons with a Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.

AUGUST, 1989

25-27—**BuboniCon.** For info, write: **Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176.** Or call: **(505) 256-7161** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Albuquerque NM (if city omitted, same as in address), at the Clarion Four Seasons. Guests will include: K. Ptacek, V. Milan. Relax pre-WorldCon.

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 776-3243** Boston WorldCon.

SEPTEMBER, 1989

1-3—**PrisonerCon, Box 172, Hatfield PA 19440.** Portmeirion, UK (where TV's "The Prisoner" filmed).

1-4—**Pretty Good Con, 2300 Knob Hill Dr., #3-16, Okemos MI 48864.** Lansing MI. Emphasis on media.

1-4—**PanTechniCon, 783 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd., Thousand Oaks CA 91360.** (805) 495-0299.

5-7—**ConClusion, Box 1051, Back Bay Annex, Boston MA 02117.** Post-WorldCon relaxacon, by gay fans.

7-10—**French National Con, % Antares, La Malagi, Chemin Calabro, La-Valette-du-Var 83160, France.**

22-24—**Prefab Trout, 55 Cedarwood Ave., Glasgow G77 5LP, UK.** At the Bellahouston Hotel.

29-1 Oct.—**ConQuest, Box 1376, Brisbane QLD 4001, Australia.** At the Gateway Hotel. SF/media.

29-1 Oct.—**Circulation, Box 47, Civic Square ACT 2608, Australia.** Canberra, Australia.

29-1 Oct.—**ConText, 376 Colonial Ave., Worthington OH 43085.** Columbus OH. For written SF only.

OCTOBER, 1989

6-8—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** V. McIntyre, A. Wold, Hal Clement, R. Pini.

6-8—**Banff International, Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843.** Banff, Alberta. Aldiss, DiFate, M. Glicksohn.

6-8—**ConChord, 1810 14th #102, Santa Monica CA 90404. (818) 719-9195.** Filking (SF folksinging) con.

6-8—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 921-7148.** Anne (Pern) McCaffrey. Gaming stress.

6-8—**BoucherCon, Box 59345, Philadelphia PA 19102.** The WorldCon for mystery fiction. Simon Brett.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $70 in 1989.

30-Sep. 3—**ConDiego, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115.** North American SF Con. $65 to end of 1989.

AUGUST, 1991

29-Sep. 2—**ChiCon V, Box A3120, Chicago IL 60690.** WorldCon. H. Clement, R. Powers. $75 in '89.

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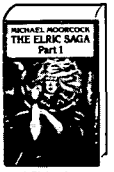

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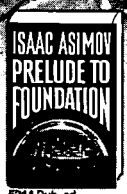

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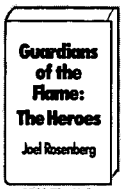

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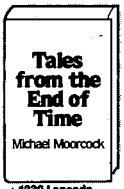

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